

BLOGGING, BABIES, AND BUSINESS:
MOMMY BLOGGING AS CITIZEN JOURNALISM

by

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ABSTRACT

With the recent tide of “Mommy Blogs” proliferating the Internet, advertisers, researchers, and mainstream media outlets have all taken notice of the societal and cultural influence mothers have. Women in every stage of parenting have become professional writers by blogging about their experiences raising children. In turn, many isolated mothers have reached out to these blogs searching for communities of support and friendship. Numerous women create mommy blogs as a place to network and share in the experience of motherhood, while others consider blogging a political platform and use it to dispel the myth of the good mother and breakdown gendered spheres. These blogs are considered part of a new movement of women participating in a “radical act” against pervasive ideologies, mostly portrayed in the media.

No other era in history has provided women the kind of global recognition that is currently available with Internet technology and its accessibility to wide audiences. Women have grasped this technology and are using it for the purpose of making the personal political. Mommy blogs act as a type of grass-roots, citizen journalism as women create personal blogs to speak out for themselves regarding their roles. These blogs empower mothers, both as writers and as readers, while also creating strong communities of women within the limitless boundaries of cyberspace.

By examining gender roles, gendered spaces, and women’s identities within the

sphere of motherhood, along with considering scholarly work on myths and ideologies, this thesis will discuss how mommy bloggers work to dispel unrealistic expectations of what good mothers are and what good mothers do. In addition, placing these ideas onto the framework of the Internet and its unique participatory format, I examine how mommy blogs have become a new identity forming space for mothers in the 21st century.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Margaret Woodhull

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wonderful and supportive husband and to my three amazing children. Without their constant encouragement and willingness to put their own needs aside for mine, I never could have accomplished all that I have.

Additionally I offer special dedication to my daughter, Abby. I did this for you, so that you could see that smart women who choose to become mothers still have a voice. Do not ever let anyone tell you any different.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Media and Mom

February 2013 marked the 50th anniversary of Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminist Mystique*, which arguably was the impetus for second wave feminism in the United States. Friedan's notable work illuminated the "problem that has no name" that many suburban white women were facing at the time (57). Their mothers having fought for educational and employment rights, Friedan's generation still found themselves relegated to the home with the burden of childcare as their main responsibility. The "problem that has no name" (or the real physical and mental illness many women were suffering from) came from this stifled lifestyle. Friedan understood and defined this female ailment by studying various women's magazines and pointing to their endorsement of a woman's ideological role within the family and society as a whole. In 1963 middle to upper class white women were expected to marry well, produce children, and be satisfied with their role as wife and mother. Magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* perpetuated this stereotype by speaking to their audience as if the opinions of the editors were the only ones to have. Friedan, herself a writer for one of these magazines, explained how she was "continually reminded by editors 'that women have to identify'" with the norm; the norm being a woman who found joy in housework, and fulfillment in motherhood (103). For women harboring a desire to go outside of these guidelines, have careers, and postpone families, the media created added pressures many of them could not handle. Friedan suggested this led to a

crisis where women were forced to identify with the public image presented in the media instead of forming their own private image based on their personal ideals. Friedan evaluated all these media influences and wrote a book that spoke for a generation of women who could not speak for themselves in a way that promoted change. Her book gave women the backing they needed to start talking to each other honestly about their experiences, and creating communities of support and action. This grass-roots effort set the stage for much needed changes in our society and for feminism at large. Women began to speak for themselves regarding what their roles actually were and how their lives should be defined. Yet they still had little space in which to articulate their issues.

The New Momism

Fifty years later, more women have gained the ability to define what their roles in and out of the home should be. But just as the pendulum always does, it has swung back to ideological views of mothering, along with new pressure fueled ideas of perfection. While the current generation of women do leave the home and have careers for themselves, the promise of ‘having it all’ from their feminist mothers has only brought to light the harsh reality that to have it all women must do it all. Today, it is not just women of color, or working class women, who are logging work hours outside of the home. A 2010 report by the U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee found that “women comprise half of all U.S. workers, and well over half of all American women are in the labor force” (“Women and the Economy” 1). Additionally the report stated that 66% of married women were part of a dual income family, with 34% the primary breadwinner (“Women and the Economy” 12). Statistically women are also still doing the majority of housework. The National Science foundation discovered that in 2005 mothers were

doing about 28 hours of “chore work” each week, whereas fathers were logging only 10 hours (Mixon). Therefore, women are working both outside and inside the home more than ever before. Mothers are exhausted from their many responsibilities and guilt-ridden from their inability to do more for their children. They have realized that no woman can give herself full-time to both career and to family.

For women who stay home with their children, the pressure is similar. Because they devote themselves to childcare full-time, many of these women feel the need to be the perfect parent. If the ideology of the past kept women in marginalized positions, the ideology of today keeps women filled with perfection anxiety. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels describe this increasing distress as the “new momism” in their 2005 book, *The Mommy Myth: the Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined all Women*. By their definition the new momism is “the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being 24/7 to her children” (4). This ideology is concerned mainly with middle to upper-class white women who have the economic and educational advantage of defining what their role should be. The new momism can be found on the covers of numerous magazines, it can be overheard in the waiting rooms of pediatrician offices, can be read about in any parenting books, and can be found in many women’s blogs. It is “a set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach” (Douglas and Michaels 5). While the media purports to celebrate motherhood,

what they present has devastating effects. Most women understand that the perfect mother does not exist, yet they kill themselves trying to identify with this standard.

Celebrating motherhood now comes in the form of acknowledging the work that mothers do. Mainstream media has switched its focus from the mother who naturally loves being home and caring for her children, as in Friedan's era, to the mother who is self-sacrificing of her time and her identity in order to raise well-adjusted children. This sacrificial narrative is manifested in many ways, such as mothers planning elaborate birthday parties for toddlers, dedicating their evenings and weekends to soccer schedules, volunteering for school field trips, buying organic produce, and baking from scratch, all while staying fit and beautiful. As mentioned, the new momism shows up everywhere in the media. For example, *Time* magazine caused a stir with their cover on May 12, 2012, where a tall, blond, beautiful woman stands breastfeeding her son, who stands on chair in order to reach her breast (Figure 1). The boy looks to be about

five years old. The caption reads, "Are You Mom Enough?"

The article inside discusses a new trend of attachment parenting where mom rarely leaves a child's side. It quickly becomes apparent that the cover and caption are meant to entice and incite readers to form immediate opinions about motherhood and to question their own mothering. The article



Figure 1- *Time* magazine cover, May 12, 2012

inside explains how some women understand their role to be: the self-sacrificing woman devoted to her children (Pickert 34). The caption questions if mothers are strong and willing to do whatever it takes to be the perfect parent—if they are “Mom Enough.”

Unfortunately, the effect images such as these have on the general public creates a vortex

of ideas and images surrounding mothers, and sets impossible standards for most women to reach. Those women who feel they cannot live up to these standards invariably feel less than their mothering counterparts. The majority of mothering standards have come from the myth of the good mother. Defined in a variety of ways, the good mother ideology keeps women trapped in a stifling existence.

The Good Mother

The new momism also stems from a discussion of the “good enough” mother; a term emanating from noted psychotherapist D.W. Winnicott in 1953. Winnicott felt that mothers should adapt to the changing needs of their children, therefore effectively eliminating women’s identities. Before Winnicott, good mothering was only defined by examining the practice of wet nursing, abandonment, and infant mortality rates (Thurer, 1994; Hays, 1996). How women kept their children alive was their only indication of good mothering. Love has also been a factor in defining good mothers, but it is much harder to prove (Dalley, 1983). The ideology of good mothering, largely a white middle class notion, has been around for many years making not just this demographic but all women feel as if they “are haunted by the cultural ideal” (Thurer xiii). Sheri Thurer traces the history of mothering from the Stone Age to the 1990s, in her book *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother* (1995). She describes how society dictates a formula for good mothering that all mothers should follow, but the formula excludes women’s experience. Her book explains how women deal with the pressure to outdo the mothers of the past, yet stay true to individual identity. Strong societal ideologies have “resulted in a level of confusion and self-consciousness among mothers that their predecessors never knew. There is a glaring need to restore mother to

her own presence, to understand that she is a person, not merely an object for her child, to recognize her subjectivity” (Thurer xii). Mothers today use whatever resources they have to satisfy their need for an identity outside of motherhood, but that often entails putting children to the side. Since motherhood has historically been a woman’s crowning achievement, and how children turn out is the standard by which she is judged, for mothers to complain about their role is tantamount to blasphemy, and more importantly, “a betrayal of one’s child” (xiv). Thurer explains how mothers were regarded in society through many generations and how children fared under their influence. Women perform mothering differently and it also varies by culture and time. The one constant is the motherhood myth itself; it has been with women for centuries.

The myth is that all women want to be mothers and that all mothers enjoy their role. This myth showed up in many books as writers tried to connect the reasons for society’s insistence that women are to produce children, be solely responsible for their care at home, and avoid careers which take them away from this responsibility. This segregation of women from the workforce led original pioneers such as Adrienne Rich to write about the disparaging differences between men and women and the societal expectations of their individual roles. Her book, *Of Woman Born* (1976), was one of the first of its kind to react against “the institution” and its need to naturalize motherhood (13). She explains, “In order for all women to have real choices all along the line, we need to fully understand the power and powerlessness embodied in motherhood in a patriarchal culture” (61). Many choices are not offered women in cultures controlled by men. A woman would have to acknowledge her lack of power in order for change to occur.

Additionally, many women scholars wrote about the difficulties presented to them once they became mothers. What they found was the dilemmas and consequences of the decision to become a mother, along with the strong emotions tied to the act, created challenges to feminist thought. How could feminists reconcile their emotions when it came to their children and their careers? It felt like a choice had to be made (either to be a mother or to have a career) when they had worked so hard to have it all. Each one of these women wrote her narrative account of her experience with motherhood (Rich, 1976; Lazarre, 1976; Dally, 1983). The importance their experiences, combined with the writing of it to inform others, are at the roots of mommy blogging. So many mothers were acknowledged in their struggle and helped through the writings of these women in the past, just as so many women are helped through the writers of mommy blogs today. Current scholars continue the tradition of examining the work of mothering and the impossibility of claiming an identity of one's own (Hays, 1996; Crittenden, 2001; Warner, 2005). They speak of the contradictory traits women must obtain to be the driven woman in the boardroom, and the self-sacrificing mother at home. The stress and anxiety women across the country are feeling by performing these dual roles is still a "crisis of motherhood" (Dally 17). And this crisis often feels as though there is no resolution.

As discussed, during the height of second wave feminism, Betty Freidan explained the frustration many white, middle-class women—the focus of this study—were feeling in 1963 over their lack of power, and collectively titled the frustration, "the problem that has no name" (57). In *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (2005), Judith Warner, calling on Freidan's work, explains that women today are dealing

with “the NEW problem that has no name” (34, emphasis added). The problem claims that mothers all share a common secret, which is that their role is not all that they thought it would be. This good mother ideology (much stronger than those of the past) crept up into the lives of women and became very destructive. One way the ideal took hold is through the creation of the bad mother. She is everywhere too. The bad mother allows her children to cry in grocery stores, she gives them Dramamine on long flights, she does not show up for PTA meetings, and in some women’s minds she actually has a career. The bad mother is not self sacrificing enough; she is selfish and undeserving of the mother title. The image of the bad mother is just as pervasive in society as the good mother. The bad mother was recently called out when Ayelet Waldman wrote an article for the *New York Times* in 2005 declaring that she loved her husband more than her children. Based on her experiences after that article was published, Waldman wrote a book entitled *Bad Mother* in 2009. In it she explains how she felt busted by the “Bad Mother police force” and was paraded through the media for being honest about her individual needs (5). She claims that women are always watching each other and on the look-out for bad mothers as part of a distraction from their own guilt. Waldman argues, “We are supposed not only to sacrifice ourselves for our children but to do so willingly, cheerfully, and without ever feeling any seething resentment, and when we fail, as we must, we feel guilty and ashamed” (15). This sacrificial narrative is part of the current ideology, and when women attempt to break free from it they suffer intense guilt. It is much easier to point to other women as bad than to acknowledge personal failure.

This fear of failure, or of falling into the bad mother category, is what holds up the myth of the good mother. The contrast of these two types of mothers has spawned

what the media calls, the Mommy wars. This war is between working mothers and stay-at-home moms and is mostly a factor for white, elite women who have the opportunity to choose a side. Deirdre Johnston and Debra Swanson explain that these two positions are “culturally constructed as rigid binaries” and lead to “polarized characterizations of motherhood” (497). In other words, the good mother verses the bad mother. Women who stay at home with their children believe career women are selfish and put their own aspirations ahead of their children’s needs. Women who work believe the stay-at-home mother is perpetuating an old fashioned ideology which keeps women tied to housework and childcare. Both sides view the other as the bad mother. This polarization leads women to believe in extreme opinions such as, “If you work, you’re neglectful; if you stay home, you’re smothering” (Waldman 18). With this type of opposition, and the media adding fuel to the fire, the mommy wars are a fight no one can win.

The mommy wars also place assumptions on motherhood that first claim all women want children and second, that women must choose between children and self. A woman as an agent of the self is an important aspect to consider. In the 1994 book, *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*, the authors discover that the “patriarchal ideology of mothering locks women into biological reproduction and denies them identities and selfhood outside of mothering” (Glenn, et al 9). When women bear children only for patriarchal societies to flourish, they lose their identities. The fight of second wave feminism, and the scholarship of the early 80s, proved that women needed a connection to self. Identity and agency are important for all members of society. If some are marginalized and kept from their own agency, history shows those who are subjugated will eventually fight back. The radical nature of mommy blogging could be

understood through the lens of women's agency as mothers are using their agency to show the opposite of the myths imposed upon them. In many ways this act is considered revolutionary as well as radical in nature. Carol Smith-Rosenberg discusses revolutions and their root beginnings. She states that revolutionaries "come forward to answer unexpected challenges, at times when old paradigms prove obsolete and new visions are required" (11). Mothers have come forward to answer the call for a new ideal. Mommy blogging is a response to assumptions, or myths, about the good mother, stemming from societal ideals displayed in the images of mainstream media.

Mommy Blogs

A technological advancement from fifty years ago, personal blogging has become a new form of grass-roots, citizen journalism. They are a venue for self-reporting which holds no accountability to a publisher or larger media outlet. Mommy blogs are one result of this new form of journalism. A 'mommy blogger' is defined by Scarborough Research as any woman over 18 who writes on the Internet on any subject at least once a month and has children living in the home who are under the age of 18 ("Mom Bloggers"). This definition has obvious problems. Just because a woman has children at home and keeps a personal blog should not automatically make her a mommy blogger. Because of this definition, many writers in the industry do not take mommy blogs seriously because they are seen as just musings from housewives. Yet, in a May 2012 article for *Forbes Magazine*, Ty Kiisel warned that "ignoring the power of this new metaphor for collaborating and learning might be a big mistake" (1). Kiisel understands how impactful it can be to society when women create communities and collaborate about issues of importance. Statistical websites report that in 2012 over 4.2 million

women internationally were blogging on a regular basis (“eMarketer Daily”). With that many women blogging, everyone should attempt to understand the reasons why.

Ty Kiisel is not the only one who recognizes the importance of women using new media forums, cyberfeminists also applaud these new media spaces as locations “devoted to issues of feminism, political activism, and the use of the Internet for democratic purposes” (Shade 2). Mothers, writing about aspects of the private sphere of the home in such a public place as the Internet, give new meaning to the feminist phrase “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 1969) as well as new meaning to public spaces. In his 1991 book, *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre explores how new spaces are created when society shifts from one lifestyle to the next (46). For example, the agrarian way of living was slowly supplanted by industrial capitalism, which in turn was replaced by late capitalism and the urban centers of life today. Similarly, technological advancements over time have led society into the digital age, which some would argue will eventually eliminate any need for physical, societal spaces. Thus, in the technological era of today, society has shifted from physical locations to virtual locations. Lefebvre argues that space consists of a triad, of the “perceived, conceived, and the lived,” or the physical, the mental, and the social (39). Women have always created their own kinds of communities, or social spaces, in which to interact and share mothering knowledge. Taking the structure of those communities and implementing them online creates a new kind of social space. It is this important social space, of which Lefebvre speaks, that sets up the kind of mind gathering once done in close proximity to other individuals and can now be done in cyberspace with the creation of specific virtual communities. Mothers took emerging technology and used it for themselves by creating personal blogs that

others could not only follow along with, but also comment on creating a valuable community of support and guidance. Cyberfeminists consider this a collective advancement in women's understanding and use of technology (Shade).

Mommy blogs are also a forum for women to share their personal experiences in parenting. They act as a huge pushback against childcare "experts" because these women are not only speaking about what has worked and not worked in their mothering, but they are also defeating the power of faceless media by doing so. Mothers do not have to look to culture to define their existence. Mommy bloggers are women telling the world their stories, and storytelling is the basis of culture (Sillars 153), therefore, mommy bloggers are defining culture for themselves. Today women do not count on others to write their narratives, or to give voice to their issues, unlike in Betty Friedan's era. Women of the 21st century are using technology for their own purposes, either as writers or readers of mommy blogs. This new media has provided women a place for their voices to be heard and allows mothers to enter a long debated conversation about their natural roles.

Mommy blogs are extremely successful, and profitable, garnering thousands of readers on a daily basis. The most successful blogs can have more than "50,000 hits per day and collect hundreds of comments per entry" (Lopez 730). There is no denying that there is something to these blogs that make women want to follow along. Far from just journal entries of bored housewives, these blogs contain opinions that can slowly change societal perceptions. Through them women can be seen as more than just mothers of children. The writers of these blogs gain prominence and attention as they write intelligent posts on topics ranging from politics to economics.

The potential audience for mommy blogs is massive. Advertisers have realized the potential for reaching specific captivated audiences and have negotiated deals with the top bloggers for publicizing their products. Danielle Wiley, a former PR exec, launched the Sway Group in 2011 as a talent agency representing some of the nation's most popular mommy blogs. Wiley estimates that at 40,000 strong, her company contains the world's largest network of female bloggers. Brand marketers recognized that these women are trusted voices, and are also young, articulate and stylish. This is where Wiley's expertise comes in as she connects bloggers to businesses. In its first year, Sway pulled in \$1 million in revenue and this year she expects revenue to exceed \$5 million (Sweeney). Because of the financial attachments to blogging, entrepreneurial women joined forces to create BlogHer, an organization devoted to providing "opportunities for women who blog to gain exposure, education, community and economic empowerment" ("Vision"). Recognition of women bloggers even came from the highest office in the land when President Obama spoke via satellite to hundreds of women bloggers during the annual BlogHer conference in August of 2012 (Camahort).

The first BlogHer conference was held in San Jose, California, in 2005 after a group of women joined in solidarity in response to the "male-centered, male-authored blogosphere" (Lopez 736). Lori Lopez reports how over 300 women gathered to discuss the impact they make on the Internet. Most in attendance wanted to be taken seriously as writers by distancing themselves from blogging about family and children on their own sites. One attendee even declared that if women would stop "blogging about themselves they could change the world" (AQI Lopez 730). This was a direct assault on the Mommy bloggers in attendance. Feeling disparaged, Alice Bradley, author of the

popular blog *Finslippy.com*, stood up and announced that mommy blogging was a “radical act,” one that dispelled myths surrounding the ideologies associated with the good mother (Lopez 730). So many women went home and blogged about this statement that the following year an entire session at the conference was devoted to this theme. The BlogHer network itself also changed in light of this incident and provided online forums specific to mommy bloggers.

Mommy blogs do not speak to the lived experience of all women or even of all mothers. Because they are mostly created and read by middle-class, heterosexual, white women, with access to emerging technologies, there is a large segment of the population that is unaccounted for. While not a perfect representation of all races and classes of women, mommy blogs do have the potential to expand the reach of some women; and for those women new media spaces are relevant and important. To deny the impact these blogs make for some women is to underscore their individual lived experiences. All women, regardless of status, deserve to have their voices heard.

Thesis

This study examines women’s voices through mommy blogging and considers the radical nature of women attempting to challenge normative gender roles in a space such as the Internet. Radical is defined here as an outspoken change in the accepted traditional norms of mothering behavior. These blogs “challenge and reinterpret representations of motherhood” (Lopez 730). They contain a strong community of women who are together speaking out on injustice, the injustice of the lack of personal identity and voice for women. What is really radical is the fact that women are using male dominated technologies to speak for themselves on issues of everything from politics, to family

planning, to domestic arts, to self-esteem. Not all mommy blogs are out to dispel the myth of the good mother, but by the virtue of their very existence mommy blogs take power from the media and from those who historically speak on behalf of women. Easy to use, free, creative blog space is available to everyone with access to technology. Women no longer need to be professional writers, or in the public eye, to share opinions of what is happening to them. Mommy blogs create a space for self-expression and identity formation. They defeat ideological constraints by negotiating public space for a woman's own use, much of which is used to show the reality of life with children. These blogs also create communities of support and encouragement for mothers who feel isolated and alone. Speaking for themselves, women now have a forum to be heard.

CHAPTER II

FEMINIST DISCOURSE AND BLOGGING

Myths, Ideologies, and Illusions

In order to fully understand mommy blogs and their influence, we must first examine the root beginnings of motherhood roles. Motherhood myths stem from societal ideologies. Louis Althusser stated, "Ideology expresses a will, a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (1264). Most women find the ideology of the good mother to be somewhat nostalgic to a past when mothers supposedly had it easier. The reality is that most mothers have struggled with their roles at one point or another and the ideology of good mothering invariably traps women into living out somewhat different versions of the role they thought mothering would be.

These myths have always drawn on ideologies created and supported by the power structures within society. In *Ideology: An Introduction* (2007), Terry Eagleton discusses many versions of the definition of ideology. He proves that an ideology cannot be the dominant belief of a society because then it would cast out all other ideologies that work independently from the rest. Also, no one would claim that what they believe is part of an ideology—it is only something we recognize in others, not ourselves. Eagleton explains ideologies as being “concerned more with the function of ideas within social life than with their reality or unreality” (3). He points out that ideology is not just about belief systems, it is also about systems of power among a dominant social group. So to study ideology is to study how that ideology serves those in power. It is bound up in values and beliefs that stem from some type of power structure, and those in power never

want to lose it. Men in our society still hold the majority of the power. Therefore, we must consider why men would want to keep their power and how they use it to hold others to the margins. The ideology of the good mother keeps women in line, and keeps them at home. Power resides outside of the home, so in order for women to gain men's power, they have typically had to leave the private sphere and enter the public one. However, many childcare experts would point to the act of leaving the home as damaging to children; therefore, it leaves women in a difficult position. Leave home to gain power or stay home to care for children. Power is an important thing to consider when unpacking ideologies, and by questioning who holds the power leads one to greater insight on the reasons behind it.

Eagleton also states, "You must be able to point to what counts as non-ideological for the term to have meaning" (9). In other words, it may be easier to define what a good mother is not. This is where the myth, or the illusion, of the bad mother stems from. No woman wants to be in the category of bad mother. In the least extreme she is fearful of being looked down upon by others, in the most extreme she is fearful of having her children taken from her. This fear also holds women to "a cultural conspiracy of silence" (Thurer xiv). Mothers are unable to be truthful about their parenting styles or opinions unless those truths paint her in a positive light. If she is truthful about the reality of her mothering, she may have social services knocking on her door. This is part of the crisis mentioned earlier. The ideology of motherhood is so tied up with power and fear that no woman can escape. Ann Dally proclaims in her 1983 book, *Inventing Motherhood, the Consequences of an Ideal*, that the way to deal with this crisis is to "examine the illusions that surround it" (19). Only then can women get out from under the pressure either by

accepting the illusion or by making something positive come from it (Dally 19). Mommy blogging is a result of women creating something good from the crisis as they expose the ideology and undermine power structures by writing the truth.

Ideologies also connect to myths. In the 1998 article, "Mothering Mythology in the Late Twentieth Century: Science, Gender Lore and Celebratory Narrative," Pamela Hall looks at the myth that mothers are formed from instinct, and those instincts are natural to women. The mother instinct is promoted in society through aspects of culture; such as, literature, art, film, and advertising. Mothering is a personal thing, between woman and child, yet it is viewed socially through the accepted culture of the time. Hall frames her research as a myth instead of an ideology because it is seen more as a story, passed down for generations, its origins unknown. She explains, "Gender lore can thus be interpreted as a form of ritual devotion to myth" (Hall 59). Categorizing the natural mother into a myth instead of an ideology helps women to see it as a story, not a reality. Women get caught up in the myth by being told that motherhood is their "biologically ordained role and source of fulfillment" (Hall 62), instead of acknowledging the real work that mothering is. Without acknowledgement of the work, no advances in childcare, work policies, or government legislation will help to improve the plight of mothers, and women will be forever stuck with societal expectations due to their gender.

Gendered Roles

Gender, and its subsequent role for both men and women, has long been studied as an aspect of hierarchical power structures in society (de Beauvoir, 1953; Scott, 1986; Wood, 1996). All research on these gendered roles begins with the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and her work in *The Second Sex* in 1953. Beyond the biological

determinants of being a woman, de Beauvoir enlightened the world by arguing that gender is a social construct of identity. One is not simply born a woman, she is taught by society what a woman is and what a woman does. Part of this identity dictated that a woman's place, her sphere of influence, was within the private sphere of the home, encouraging her connection to nature by producing and caring for children. In contrast, a man's sphere has typically been public and outside of the home, connecting his work to culture (Ortner, 1974). For women to use the outside Internet as a space to expose their dissatisfaction with their roles in the home creates questions regarding gender identity.

Gender roles are not created at birth; they are created out of patriarchal systems to which women have historically had no control. They are formed partially through the language of society, which creates stereotypes that contain expectations for each sex. For example, men can mother children but no woman can father a child; even in households of single mothers, women do not father children. As Nancy Chodorow explains in her 1978 book *The Reproduction of Mothering*, our language only makes it possible for women to mother, while fathers can both father and mother. While this might just be a semantic difference, it is the perception around mothering being an action, or a "continuing presence," and fathering a contribution of seed in order to "beget" a child, which makes the roles interchangeable for men but not for women (Rich 12). Therefore, women are expected to both become mothers (the noun) and learn to mother (the verb) equally. What women take on because of this expectation is overwhelming. Their role becomes one of mother only, and all other identifiers to self are lost (Chodorow 12). In fact, the term mother (noun) has been around for centuries, but motherhood (the adjective) only became a common phrase during the Victorian era. There motherhood

developed as a “concept rather than a mere statement of fact” and was invented out of the idealization of what society felt women should be (Dally 17). So mother is the woman and motherhood is the ideal she must live up to. This ideal changes with each generation, as does the language that supports it. The difference in the language can create undo pressures on women who easily find themselves as mothers, yet must work hard to reach societal expectations of motherhood.

The language of a culture, how people use it, and how those in power control it, becomes an important part of any society (Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981). Typical of most cultures, women are often excluded in the formation of their own speech. There are many anthropological reasons for this, the main one being that women, heavy laden with domestic chores, have not had as many opportunities as men to speak. Furthermore, women have usually only concerned themselves with the words of other women, using them in their own smaller communities. Because of this, on the whole, women have thus been considered a muted group (Ardener, 1975). Based on their experiences in life, different from that of men, women use language differently in and among their own social groups (Kramarae, 1981). Gender then, plays a big part in language development and communication. Julia Wood argues in *Gendered Relationships* (1996), “What gender means and how we embody it depend directly on communication that expresses, sustains, and changes views of women and men” (3). Until women can openly use language which meets their needs, they will be unable to defeat gendered stereotypes. Although, having a forum to use language to change social views of men and women has typically been the larger problem. With the advent of Internet technologies and personal blogging spaces, a new platform has presented itself—a gender neutral space open to all.

Gendered Spaces

Spaces have long been considered gendered. For example, the kitchen is most commonly understood as female and the garage would traditionally be considered male. These spaces are concerned with the work that goes on within them, what Henri Lefebvre would explain as the social aspects of the space. The private sphere of the home is therefore gendered female, and the public sphere of the office is gendered male (Spain, 1992). The Internet breaks down these spheres because it is part private sphere in that it is accessible from the home, yet also part public sphere in that it reaches outside the home. Judy Wajcman explains in her book *Techno Feminism* (2004) that “the World Wide Web is seen as beyond the control of any one group, and thus open to being deployed by women for their own social and political purposes. This is highly subversive of the conventional definition of woman as biologically determined and confined to the private sphere” (3). The Internet is open and accessible to anyone who has access to technology. By creating virtual spaces outside the home, women use historically male-dominated technology to create mommy blogs and subsequently break down barriers of gendered spheres.

While the Internet is not considered as masculine as it was when it was created, it still does give men a certain status that is often unreachable by women. For example, more men have political blogs than women, and political blogging is considered the epitome of status in the blogging world. Daphne Spain in her book *Gendered Spaces* (1992) argues the connection between space and status. She explains, “[W]omen’s status is mediated by the limits placed on women’s access to knowledge. In essence, spatial segregation does more than create a physical distance; it also affects the distribution of

knowledge women could use to change their position in society” (xvi). The limits to spatial segregation are defeated through the Internet because it creates a virtual location filled with information, almost like a library, for women who are searching for knowledge. Mothers have often consulted parenting books, spoken to doctors, and asked advice from friends when looking for answers to parenting problems. The Internet just makes it easier to access information and participate in similar conversations online.

The sheer popularity of mommy blogs, and the financial attachments to them through advertising, makes a woman’s status much more desirable than it has been in the past. Women web entrepreneurs have found the Internet to be a “viable . . . business venue” that appeals to mothers who are “balancing multiple life roles,” because of its convenience and flexibility in regards to caring for children while also managing an online career (Jome, et al, 128-9). So if status is tied to income, mommy blogs are fulfilling an unmet need for women. This newfound status allows women a stronger voice in a capitalistic society and acts as an invitation for other women to try out this business model. By creating their own blogs, women also become part of a feminist action as they use male-dominated technologies to speak for themselves.

Cyberfeminism

In her book *Gender & Community in the Social Construction of the Internet* (2002), Leslie Regan Shade explores the historiography of women in the technological space of the Internet. She states, “Cyberfeminism emerged in the early 1990s as a feminist approach to technoculture and cyberspace theorizations. It was at once a stance, an attitude, an emerging theory, a political statement, and an art practice” (46). Feminist scholars grasped onto technology and used it to make a statement. Negative attitudes

about women in the technological field grew from assumptions that women were fearful and uninformed about technology. The differences in use of computers created a large gap between men and women. Cyberfeminism as a philosophy acknowledges these gender differences in emerging technologies, and examines their root beginnings up to its uses today. Women are found to be creators and producers within the technological realm and are discovering comfort in the communities that technology is helping them to create and/or find. These communities are spaces of support and guidance for women who are searching out new identities either as an introduction to motherhood, or as a break from mothering roles. When mommy bloggers claim to be showing the reality of motherhood, they are crafting identities molded from truth, the truth of their lived experiences, and shattering the myths surrounding motherhood. Judy Wajcman expands on this theme as she explains how the Internet “is a new space for undermining old social relations, a place of freedom and liberation from conventional gender roles” (3). Women use the Internet as a space to change outdated gender roles. In this sense, the Internet can be seen as empowering as it creates opportunities for women to expand their influence and make impactful decisions within cyberspace and the world at large.

At the onset of research regarding Internet technologies, few scholars were discussing how women were using the Internet for themselves in a positive way. Emphasis on gender participation in virtual spaces, such as in cyber cafes and online public forums, increased in the late 90s as people came to recognize the impact women were having online. Leisure activities, such as cooking, crafting, and parenting, sprung up in the public space of the Internet as women created communities that focused on topics usually reserved for the private sphere of the home. Shade points out that currently

researchers are most interested in how the Internet has exposed “tensions between the public and the private sphere” as women are using this space to write their narratives in a safe space, a space filled with communities of like-minded individuals (2). Shade explores these communities as gathering places “devoted to issues of feminism, political activism, and the use of the Internet for democratic purposes” (5). Her book also focuses on how gender roles are reinforced and subverted often simultaneously as women create spaces for themselves and for larger more commercial interests. This lens requires us to “adopt both a feminist social-shaping perspective on technology, as well as a feminist political-economic focus” (5). Mommy blogs are more than a journalistic forum; they are also a profit-making machine. Many mommy blogs have been used to sell products, garner book and television deals, and been operated by large corporations as a marketing gimmick. This financial aspect of blogging brings with it many benefits, the greatest of which is the impact of blogging on women’s economic power as a group. The financial benefits of mommy blogging give many women something to strive for, namely, economic independence. Wajcman describes how technology is liberating for women in its potential for the creation of strong communities that create “social capital” or the kind of power that comes from social groups (Rheingold 7). The importance of community building within blog space cannot be denied. The manifestation of important interpersonal skills is evident when you consider how women are specifically using their blogs to communicate with other women, create tight knit communities, and expand their reach within cyberspace.

Community and Liminality

Authors Clare Madge and Henrietta O’Connor conducted an important study on

cyberspace community in 2005. Their work explores the topic of motherhood and its “liminality” online. Using data from a specific group of women who used parenting websites in the first few months of delivery, they found this liminality to be a space between two social statuses. They argue that the Internet is the perfect site for research on women transitioning from woman to mother because cyberspace gives women the opportunity to try out “different versions of motherhood resulting in the production of new selves” (Madge and O’Connor 84). Women enter the Internet looking for communities in an attempt to gain knowledge and belong, specifically during the transition time from woman to mother. New mothers have always found comfort among other women by entering a community (or sisterhood) of other women who have had similar experiences. These communities were created out of need by women and for women, and were not tied to any specific location or place. Jane Lazarre defines the reason for these communities in her 1976 book, *The Mother Knot*. Women need each other to discuss similar experiences in life; they “turn to each other, individually and collectively, for speech and help” (Lazarre xi). When it comes to children, society views the responsibility as falling onto woman’s shoulders; thus strong communities of women are usually created in every society.

Madge and O’Connor found new mothers gained a great deal from virtual communities. In addition to knowledge and support, many women reported finding friends to help them in their transition into motherhood right when they needed them the most. The study acknowledged that friendships and communities lessen for women after their children are born, making it ever more important to have a way to reach out and find the support they need; especially when it was not always possible to leave their homes for

the traditional networks they had used in the past. Online communities worked in conjunction with onsite communities to provide the support these new mothers were looking for (Madge and O'Connor 87). In addition, the study found that since mommy bloggers were more willing to be honest in their reporting of parenting realities, it greatly increased the confidence of the new mothers involved. Participants in the study reported wanting to reach out to others in similar situations so that they might feel "normal" and to "legitimize their changing feelings as they became mothers" (Madge and O'Connor 90). This data suggests that women are more willing to express themselves in what they consider a safe environment. The majority of women who participated in the study stated that it did not matter that they had never met the other people they spoke to, in fact it was the anonymous nature of the virtual community that helped them be more truthful and less cautious about what they revealed compared to what they were willing to reveal to their families (Madge and O'Connor 91). The anonymous environment of blogs also alleviates certain responsibilities that women face when creating friendships with other women. In other words, the time and physical effort usually required in friendships is alleviated through anonymity. I include all this data because it is relevant to the importance of how individual women, specifically women who have the technology to communicate in this medium, benefit from mommy blogs not just as writers, but also as readers.

Shade endorses a variety of theorists who examine the social uses that women create out of technology and "the change in social structure as a result of the collective use and response towards a technology" (6). Some mommy bloggers hope their words will change the social structure, or ideology, of what motherhood means and how the

public at large should view it. Other women have stepped forward to express how mommy blogs have helped them in their own acceptance of themselves as women and as mothers. This acceptance comes from the interactive nature of blogging. Because of the ability to comment on blog posts, feedback is gained instantly and writer and reader can connect to gain mutual knowledge and understanding; knowledge which in turn helps women to embrace their individual identities, whether one of mother or woman. Therefore, the social uses of blogging are important and impactful.

Why Study Blogs?

While personal blogs may not seem to be an ordinary site for research, their very diary like format can help researchers peer into the minds of individuals in order to gather valuable information and data. In Nicholas Hookway's 2008 article, "'Entering the Blogosphere': Some Strategies for Using Blogs in Social Research," he explains social scientists have used diaries for years to collect data on everyday life experiences in order to understand social life from the individual's perspective. Blogs function similarly as they are self-narratives of the minutia of life as well as a report on the dramatic aspects of being human. However, blog research also solves normal problems associated with gathering data from interviewing subjects or holding focus groups. Typically data gathering becomes a challenge when subjects are unwilling to share their experiences or have difficulty remembering them. Viewing blogs over time helps researchers with collecting sensitive information that normally participants might not be willing to share in a focus group or in an interview. Many times research subjects struggle with memory recollection, but since blogs capture the everyday present, there is a closer connection to the experience and the recording of it in the online diary (Hookway 94-95).

There is also no shortage of blogs available for research. They are a publicly available, easily accessible, and low cost way to gather data from various sized groups worldwide. Currently, data on the number of blogs that exist varies. Some conservative estimates claim 2.8 million blogs, while liberal estimates state there are upwards of 100 million blogs worldwide with 50 million in the United States alone (Hookway 93). Within the specific category of mommy blog, emarketer.com estimates that in 2013 there will be 4.3 million blogs written by women with children still living at home—a defining trait for mommy bloggers.

In the 2004 article “Why We Blog,” researchers Bonnie Nardi, Diane Schiano, Michelle Gumbrecht, and Luke Swartz explain, “Blogging is sometimes viewed as a new, grassroots form of journalism and as a way to shape democracy outside the mass media and conventional party politics. . . the vast majority of blogs are written by ordinary people for much smaller audiences” (41). When women use mommy blogs to speak for themselves, instead of letting the media speak for them, the blog becomes a site for citizen journalism. It also becomes useful in data research as women are typically forthcoming in the information they share regarding matters usually reserved for private conversations. The intimate nature of blogging helps researchers gather data on private lives and actions of subjects as well as the dramatic aspects of “everyday interactions, selves and situations” (Hookway 94). Bloggers document daily life activities and juxtapose them against public events resulting in new journalism. Hookway perceives blogs as “open-access, participatory journalism,” which opens up space for civic engagement and creates “new forms of community and identity” (94). Mommy blogs themselves share these aspects of participatory journalism in that they create forums for

women to share in aspects of motherhood, but also provide a place for instant commentary and feedback from readers, something no other media has been able to provide in the past. Mommy blogs are also a space for consciousness raising as they open the public mind to differing opinions regarding motherhood ideologies.

It should not be overlooked that personal blogging is also somewhat performative in nature as bloggers know they are writing for a public audience. This has the potential to change the reasons for blogging from honest reporting to eliciting a reactionary response. Hookway describes this facet of blogging when he states, “It is this potential presence of an audience and its immediacy to authors that is one of the key ways in which blogs differ from traditional forms of personal diary keeping” (96). The audience changes the personal nature of blogging, yet it also creates valuable interactions within a community.

Mommy Blogs as Rhetorical Artifacts

By considering mommy blogs as a rhetorical artifact it is possible to view them from the lens of persuasion and therefore consider if they are in fact the “radical act” Alice Bradley claimed they were. The term radical suggests an intended movement towards ideological change within society or some type of extreme social reform. An artifact is any item or medium that reflects culture or a specific period of time. A rhetorical artifact is one that persuades in some way. Mommy blogs are indicative of culture today and they use persuasive language. Sonia Foss, author and professor at the University of Colorado Denver, argues in her 2004 book *Rhetorical Criticism* that all artifacts contain race, gender, and class as well as “other dimensions of identity” which can be examined via feminist criticism (158). In fact, she states that artifacts which

inspire an emotional response from a marginalized or subordinate group are excellent to study because the rhetoric they employ suggests how the “ideology of domination is constructed and maintained or how it can be challenged and transformed” (158). Some mommy blogs claim to challenge dominant motherhood ideologies and therefore fit well into Foss’ definition. While the blogs may seem on the surface (and through their very category of “mommy”) to hold certain expectations for a woman’s societal role, and seem to possess a defined position to their audience, they in fact are more than what they seem. In general these blogs are a viewpoint of the world seen from the eyes of a woman. In these blogs women are the subject, not the object as in most other places on the Internet. Women on these blogs speak for themselves about subjects of interest to them; they are not spoken about or spoken to as in other societal locations. I refer to these blogs as a location in that they create a site for others to gather and socialize within. Mommy blogs in this study are an artifact that can be examined, as well as a location within cyberspace.

Along with blogs as a rhetorical artifact, this study also considers how blogs are narrative arguments that can be analyzed for aspects of culture. Malcolm Sillars argues, “Humans make sense of their world by the stories they tell about themselves, their experiences, and the other persons with whom they associate” (152). Story telling is sense making and stems from experiences within culture. Story telling also helps to shape culture. Scholars have long evaluated narratives as a form of cultural communication. Culture is partly what people do and what they believe within society, yet a narrative does not echo culture, it is a comment on culture. Mommy blogs are narrative accounts from mothers who reflect on their experiences within motherhood. Narratives are also a form of argument in that they support certain claims, a claim

embedded within a story. In the case of mommy blogging, the narratives that come from women claim the reality of motherhood, as opposed to a perfected motherhood that is sometimes presented in the media. Personal narratives are the “central element in human communication” because they define a social reality (Sillars 153). By studying personal narratives, in this case mommy blogs, we can understand what culture is like from the people who are living it.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Foss also encourages the use of standpoint theory as she explains, “An analysis of gender in an artifact also may depict various choices open to women and men in terms of their standpoints, the material conditions of their lives, the degree to which they assume agency, and even how they define the dominant system and their status vis-à-vis that system” (159). The specifics of a woman’s life, and the way she chooses to live it, becomes an aspect of her agency. Motherhood is a standpoint from which only women can describe. They speak to their lived experiences as mothers from within the ideology, while also acknowledge being on the outside of culture because of their gender. Mothers are also often on the periphery of most feminist discourse, especially if they remain within the private sphere of the home, because feminist discourse has traditionally been about women breaking into the public sphere alongside of men. Research suggests “the ‘double vision’ afforded to those who experience social relations from a position of marginality can, under certain circumstances, offer them epistemic advantage” (Bowell). Only from the margins can women speak to their own marginality. Knowledge about their own subjectivity to gendered roles, for example, can help women enhance the conversation on blogs because experience is always a good starting point to knowledge.

Adrienne Rich understood the importance of experience when she wrote about the difference between the “*institution* of motherhood under patriarchy . . . and the *experience* of mothering, which implied new and feminist possibilities” (Thurer 265). Speaking from experience, women can argue for their mothering choices.

Women have historically been marginalized due to their gender. Man’s connection to culture and women’s connection to nature favors the intellectual sphere of men (Ortner). Female subjugation stemmed from a women’s ability (and her responsibility) to produce children. Therefore, women who are mothers become even more marginalized as they are confined to the home and away from any spheres of influence. Sandra Harding explains in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (2004): “Standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemic, scientific and political advantage” (7-8). Disadvantaged from the start because they are women, mothers have the opportunity on their blogs to speak for themselves on any issue, specifically those related to motherhood ideologies, and turn them into an advantage politically. Harding continues by clarifying:

The emergence of standpoints is a collective process occurring through the recognition and acknowledgment of others who occupy more or less the same standpoint as oneself . . . Thus the epistemic process whereby a standpoint emerges enables the occupants of that standpoint to gain an element of power and control over knowledge about their lives. In becoming occupants of a standpoint, they also become knowing subjects in their own right, rather than merely objects that are known by others.
(xx)

Women gain power by being able to speak to their own experiences. Mommy blogs show that power when women share stories in regard to their gender roles, and when other women follow along to participate in role sharing. For example, in 2010 Alice Laussade described her personal reason for looking into mommy blogs as a resource: “I

needed information from moms who were currently succeeding at the task of keeping baby happy.” Laussade implies that the knowledge she needs must come from another mother who shared her standpoint. Specifically viewing mommy blogs using standpoint theories, I am able to decipher their sphere of influence.

Muted Group Theory

Similar to standpoint theory, muted group theory is important when viewing mommy blogs. Originated by Edwin Ardener in 1975, muted group theory is based on the idea that language is constructed by dominant groups. Ardener, a social anthropologist, was the first to describe women as “muted” because of their inability to be part of the dominant group in society. He recognized the lack of power women had within culture. Language is generated from culture, and since men control culture and are also the dominant group, it is their words informing the societies in which they live. Women are muted in this system not only because of language, but because they historically have had no voice within their communities. Cheris Kramarae took Ardener’s theories a step further and added in the idea of perception, noting that women perceive the world and are perceived by the world differently than men based on their experiences. Women’s experiences are different from those of men because of their subordination, and women’s talk is not of value to men because they are “blind to much of women’s experiences” (Kramarae 1). With this differing perspective, men and women are assigned different tasks in society. Caring for children is a task assigned to women, a task which is performed in the private sphere of the home. If women are already a muted group compared to men, mothers become even more muted when considering their relegation to the private sphere. Muted group theory gives researchers scaffolding for

understanding how language is used to present ideas of what a woman's life is supposed to look like, or what is "natural" and "unnatural" for her (Kramarae 29). Kramarae further explains how certain groups are muted in their ability to speak the language of the acknowledged power group, because of the "inarticulateness" that comes from using a language not created for their use (1). Women are at a disadvantage when they want to speak up on matters that concern them; therefore, they historically have turned to diary writing in order to express themselves. Unfortunately, women's diaries were not of particular importance to society because they contained writings on matters not considered of value to men (Kramarae 13). But, more recent scholarship acknowledges the value of diary writing as a record of women's lives and as a different viewpoint for the details within history. Hookway discusses how social scientists have used diaries for years in order to uncover data and information on daily activities. They act as a "means for understanding social actors both as observers and informants of social life" (Hookway 95). For women specifically, dairies can provide insight into their lived experiences as well as give voice to their historically marginalized existence. The language within diaries is more specific to women and to their interests, which has often been left out of the historical record. Women are not as muted when considering diary writing.

History has a way of changing based on revolutions within subordinated groups. Kramarae states, "The muted group theory suggests that women who explicitly express their discontent with many of the values and actions of the dominant group will do so by revising, getting around, and resisting the conventional communication systems" (Kramarae 21). Using Internet technologies, mommy bloggers usurp the dominance of traditional media and focus on new spaces in order to defeat some of the constraints

associated with being a muted group. Through their personal blogs, women not only speak in a language which defines their motherhood experiences, but within a medium that has changed conventional communication systems. My research looks at women's standpoints as mothers and shows that mommy blogs give women—a traditionally muted group—a new voice.

Types of Blogs

Before analyzing specific blogs according to any of the proposed theories, it is important to make the distinction between their different types. According to Bonnie Nardi, Diane Schiano, Michelle Gumbrecht, and Luke Swartz, in the article “Why We Blog” (2004), there are basically three types of blogs: online diaries, personal publishing journals, and weblogs. First, are online diaries. Many people use online diaries or journals to keep track of life events. Personal diaries or journal writing is nothing new to women. Historical journals and letters are often the only record we have of many women's lived experiences. Scrapbooks, containing a combination of pictures and words, were also created to record specific periods of time in history. Many scholars use scrapbooks as historical records of individuals, because they can be used to piece together personal histories. With technology advancing and the Internet becoming part of many households throughout the US, journaling changed again as the mommy blog was envisioned in early 2000. At first just online diaries, the technology advanced turning blogs into creative modes of expression, not only with written words, but also with visual stimuli. These personal blogs combine the three functions of past record keeping: documentation of women's lived experience, a digital record of pictures and stories, and

a way to communicate with loved ones near and far, all but eliminating the need for physical journals, scrapbooks, and letters.

Within the diary format of blogs, Carmen Stavrositu and S. Shyam Sundar explain that blogs are either “personal journals,” which focus on the day to day aspect of the bloggers life, or “filter blogging,” which comment on the external, such as the social or political events going on around the writer. Filter blogs are generally considered those that can affect social change. Mommy blogs are a combination of personal journals and filter blogs. Their content is usually personal, but also contains aspects of the external, suggesting that a woman’s personal life can be considered political at times.

The second category of blogs is personal publishing journals. Written by professionals in their field, these blogs are subsets of online publications, or as forum used to sell themselves as writers. Nardi et al, explain about these blogs that “some of their posts might have a future life in magazine articles, scholarly research, or other conventional publications” (45). Industry experts scout out these blogs looking for experienced writers. Many of the blogs discovered under the category of mommy blogs fit this profile, because professional writers become instant authorities on motherhood when writing a mommy blog. Numerous bloggers have gotten book deals, other writing jobs, or even television shows as an outcome from their success. For example, Ree Drummond turned her very feminine blog—*ThePioneerWoman.com*—into numerous book deals and a cooking show on the Food Network. Her blog is mostly filled with visuals on the food and lifestyle of a western woman. Powered by the BlogHer network, *ThePioneerWoman.com* is considered a personal publishing blog.

The third category of blogs is weblogs. Weblogs act as listing service or directory for other blogs. People who manage and run weblogs are constantly scrolling the Internet looking for whatever sites are out there that might be helpful to others; for example both *Babble.com* and *TopMommyblogs.com* recommend mommy blogs. Large conglomerate companies often create weblogs in an attempt push more people to their own site and products by partnering with other blogs. *Babble.com* is owned and operated by the Disney Company, whereas *TopMommyBlogs.com* has an individual owner and is not affiliated with other corporations (aside from its numerous advertisements). Both of these sites use various rating systems to suggest the best mommy blogs on the Internet. In the case of *TopMommyBlogs.com*, the rating system is a referral program to decide which blogs are the best by category. If your blog has the highest average referrals in, you are the top blogger for the month. These referrals come from readers and other mommy bloggers. *Babble.com* rates their mommy blog choice by categories: 1) Best written, 2) The funniest, 3) Most controversial, 4) Best design, 5) Most confessional, and 6) Most useful. The panel that decides which blogs are the best each year is made up of other bloggers, freelance writers, and marketing experts (*Babble.com*). However, neither site gives adequate information on the reasons why women create mommy blogs or why women choose to follow along.

Motivations for Blogging

Visually stunning, mommy blogs play on the idea that women like color and pictures. Hookway describes these blogs as “striking” because of their “diverse, and sometimes, complex visual designs and layouts” (101). Blogs are both textual documents and visual documents and encourage both forms of expression through their use of

templates, icons, color schemes and selection of images. There is often so much going on in some of these blogs it can be distracting. Mommy blogs themselves attract different kinds of women. Some women are looking for crafts and recipes, others are looking for heartwarming stories about adoption or overcoming child illness, but most seem to be looking for a voyeuristic peek inside a life behind the perfection. From my research on the top blogs, the most popular provide a confession of some sort and all contain humorous writings. At the very least, all the mommy blogs at the “top” contain a “strong sense of the author’s desired personality, passions and point of view” (Nardi 42). Their blog names, *ScaryMommy.com*, *OneBoredMommy.com*, *SmartyPantsMama.com*, and *OutlawMama.com*, represent this point of view and are often their identifier as a mom.

In reviewing the 25 blogs I chose, I found a strong set of motivations for blogging, which correspond with Bonnie Nardi, et al, and are as follows:

1. Documenting the life of children (further broken down into categories of birth, adoption, special needs, multiples, etc.).
2. Communicating/sharing information with friends and family near and far (blogs as a form of letter writing).
3. Expressing deep emotions on a subject/catharsis (dealing with illness/depression, etc.)
4. Providing opinions and commentary on culture/events (blogs as journalism).
5. Creating community forums (blogs inviting feedback through questions).

While this is not a complete list, most mommy blogs fall into one of those five categories. For the purpose of this study I will focus on blogs as commentary/journalism and as community forum.

Chosen Artifacts and Research Questions

The sheer number of blogs on the Internet and of mommy blogs specifically, makes it difficult to narrow down the individual blogs to use for research. As Hookway acknowledges, entering the Internet to scroll through thousands of blogs is like “gazing into a dark and tangled labyrinth” and can be overwhelming (98). This presented a huge challenge as I attempted to begin my research because it is impossible to contain the space or experience it all.

Over the course of the last year I have reviewed hundreds of mommy blogs. I narrowed the field by considering 25 of the most popular as rated by *TopMommyBlogs.com* and *Babble.com*. I chose these two weblogs because they are very popular (they come up first when googling “mommy blogs”) but different (in their rating system) in how they recommend mommy blogs to the general public. It is important to consider that popular means they have the most readership, and high readership indicates the largest identifier of mommy blog culture.

Because the list was still rather large, I needed to narrow the pool down and develop my own process of elimination. Therefore, the first way I chose to eliminate was to not use blogs that were written by women outside of the United States. While those blogs might be a great resource, I felt it was important to stick to motherhood ideologies present within this country, and without knowing what those ideologies are outside of the U.S. I did not want to presuppose anything.

Second, I eliminated blogs if they were part of another news source. For example, *The New York Times* hosts a very popular mommy blog on their site called “The Motherload.” This felt too much like journalism of the past, and not the “grass roots”

version I was looking for. Similarly, I also did not want blogs that sprang from books or vice versa, feeling that if a mommy blog was merely writing content to promote a book already on shelves, or writing content specifically for a new book, it would not be considered radical, but more capitalistic in nature. Unfortunately, the coveted book deal is what most mommy bloggers write for and over the past year I have witnessed two of my research subjects garner book deals. I also chose not to look at Alice Bradley's blog, *Finslippy.com*. Since she was the one to originally declare mommy blogging as a radical act, her blog would undoubtedly show signs of radicalism and point to a decidedly performance aspect in blogging.

Third, I chose blogs with some form of "mom" in the title. With the unfair definition of a mommy blogger as any woman who blogs with children under the age of 18 in the home, I chose to look at blogs where women self-identify as a mommy blogger by using their blog title to make that distinction. Therefore, I chose *Mom-101.com*, *HotMessMom.com*, *Momastery.com*, and *Not-Your-Average-Mom.com* from the top blogs as rated by *Babble.com* and *TopMommyBlogs.com* (2 blogs from each list). All of these blogs self-identify as a mommy blogger, they are written by women residing in the United States, and they are not part of another news source.

I also kept the following research questions in mind when analyzing each blog: What is the overall purpose of this blog? How does it use subject matter, language, and the space to inform, persuade, and/or inspire? In what ways does this blog expose motherhood ideologies and myths? Does the rhetorical content of the blog constitute a radical act? Does it utilize a narrative format for the purpose of challenging the pervasive discourse on motherhood norms or is merely performative in nature and play to audience

expectations? I attempted to answer these questions by being an active reader of each blog and used a critical rhetorical lens when unpacking their narratives. Although, this research still contains limitations in its depth and breadth.

Limitations of the Study

I acknowledge the limitations of this study and suggest they are three fold. First, because of the sheer number of mommy blogs in existence, and more being created each day, it is almost impossible to get an adequate sample to determine if what these women are doing is considered radical. Since the content on the blog changes on a regular basis, without looking at the entire span of posts for each blog it is not accurate to claim that one blog is completely radical and one is not. Also, for every blog I found which seemed to be dispelling motherhood myths there was another one that upheld it. So, when Alice Bradley claimed that mommy blogging was a radical act, even she did not take into consideration the numerous blogs that uphold motherhood ideologies. The obvious question that comes out of this limitation is: what do we do with all the women who are using blogging as a way to speak of their experience that represents traditional womanly arts? The voices from these women should also count even when they are content with their domestic role.

Second, it was extremely difficult to understand which blogs were the “top” or best in any category because, again, the information changes almost daily. In the case of *Babble.com*, “experts” in the field generate a list of the best mommy blogs on a yearly basis. So, the best are chosen purely out of the opinions of others. Also, since *Babble.com* is owned and operated by Disney, there could be some capitalistic influences from the parent company. If one mommy blog reviews Disney vacations and products

better than another blog, it is possible the first blog could be reviewed as better than the next. In the case of *TopMommyBlogs.com*, the best are generated from mommy bloggers encouraging readers to vote for their blog. While this may sound like an ideal way to choose the best blogs, I noticed that many mommy blogs included links at the end of their blogs that readers merely needed to click once for ratings. Specifically on *Not-Your-Average-Mom.com*, Susie J. repeatedly begged her readers to “VOTE FOR ME” all over each page of her blog with the easy link underneath. This type of rating system does not seem to provide factual evidence as friends and family could recommend a page repeatedly giving mommy bloggers an inaccurate account of actual readers. I have thought about this issue since starting this project and have found no other system that would work better. Because blogs are not like books that can sell, there is no real way to categorize the “best.”

The third limitation I recognize in this study is the lack of voice from women of color. Leslie Regan Shade points to this difference in her article on the annual BlogHer conferences. Because of the obvious white, middle-class, economically viable representations at the conference, some women found they could not identify with the norm. Another organization sprung up for multi-cultural women called Blogalicious. Jessie Daniels discusses this organization and points out: “What is different here is that while race—specifically whiteness—is assumed, taken for granted, and goes unremarked upon at BlogHer, at Blogalicious race is given equal status with motherhood” (39). But again, Blogalicious is intended to teach women bloggers how to market themselves to potential advertisers, not as a site for social change. They state, “Our Mission: to grow a community that celebrates digital diversity and to serve as a supportive platform for its

members to develop their social media presence, blogs, brands, and businesses” (“Mission”). This statement certainly sounds supportive but their site does not provide any links to their member’s blogs, which made it difficult for me to get a sense of the relationship between Blogalicious and their member blogs.

After doing some Internet searching on my own I found *BlackAmericaWeb.com*, a weblog that provides a list of their top mommy blogs. They recommend: *MyBrownBaby.com*, *BlackandMarriedwithKids.com*, and *MochaManuel.com*. While these blogs are similarly formatted as white women’s mommy blogs, the issues they discuss are not exactly the same. These blogs are not working to dispel motherhood ideologies; they seem to be fighting their own battles. For example, statistically black women do not breast feed their children as much as white or Hispanic women (Denene), so many mommy blogs written by these women work to inform the public of the importance of breastfeeding within their own culture. Similarly, *KimchiMamas.com* is written for Koreans and deals with many cultural issues like combating Asian stereotypes in parenting, and helping adopted children connect to their native land. My point is that each culture has its own issues and ideologies to deal with. Stating that all mommy blogs are radically dispelling motherhood myths might not be accurate for each culture. Although, women speaking for themselves in any society can still be considered a revolutionary action, and mommy blogs specifically do uphold my thesis in that they all contain community and some aspects of citizen journalism.

CHAPTER III

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Weblog Analysis

Before going into detail on each blog studied, I would like first to rhetorically analyze the weblogs in which I found the blogs because they provide insight into the reasons women choose one mommy blog to follow over another.

On *Babble.com*, the page is visually sleek and uses white space well, although, the first banner you see is an advertisement that changes daily. It blinks and scrolls drawing your eye to the product (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – *Babble.com*, April 10, 2013

On *Babble.com* you must search to find the

top blogs for the year because the main page contains recommended blogs for the day based on sub categories such as: Food, kid, Baby, Voices, Celebrity, Pregnancy, and Dad. It is apparent that whatever women are looking for, *Babble.com* has a blog for it.

The language used to set up the top mommy blogs on *Babble.com* is as follows:

The top mom bloggers — they make us laugh, they make us cry, and most importantly, they make us feel like we've got allies in this wonderfully weird world of parenting. Our Top 100 list is an annual salute to those who are brave enough to air their best and worst parenting moments, and includes blogosphere staples as well as newcomers. At Babble, we believe that all parents are in the business of raising the next generation together. We've brought people into the world who need us very deeply. And despite the “mommy wars” that hogged headlines this year, we need each other; we need to feel connected to those who are in the trenches with us.

Here are the top 100 moms — narrowed down with the help of our esteemed panelists — who remind us that we're not alone.

The persuasive language within this passage alone is powerful. Mothers looking for blogs as entertainment focus on the words, “they make us laugh, they make us cry,” and “best and worst parenting moments.” Mothers looking to find an online community of support relate with words such as: “they make us feel like we've got allies in this wonderfully weird world of parenting,” and “we need to feel connected to those who are in the trenches with us.” While mothers looking for recognition for their job as mom can embrace phrases like, “all parents are in the business of raising the next generation together.” There is no denying the language behind *Babble.com*’s weblog. It is meant to persuade readers to check out the blogs they recommend.

On *TopMommyBlogs.com*, recommended sites are listed with colorful graphics



Figure 3 – *TopMommyBlogs.com*, April 10, 2013

and star ratings. Their logo is an illustration of a woman juggling various items: a cupcake, barbell, rolling pin, computer, apple, briefcase, and a baby (Figure 3). This illustration alludes to the juggling act many moms feel they do each

day. The main banner is an advertisement reminding those who log on to “Shop with me @ Zulily.” Their introduction is as follows:

Top Mommy Blogs is your ultimate resource for finding the most popular mom blogs on the web. Here you can: Browse through our 4500+ members in 30 different categories. Follow tireless deal searching mama’s [sic] in our Top Mommy Blogs Coupon Edition. Discover, rate and share mommy blogs with our social network enabled listings. Promote your own mommy blog for free. Make new friends, discuss mommyhood, mommy blogging & more in the TMB Lounge. Looking to

start your own blog or meet other TMB members? Check out the TMB Lounge (Top Mommy Blogs forum/message boards) for great advice & tips for starting your own blog and lots more.

Again, the language of persuasion is evident with words like, “most popular” and “rate and share” which draws on ideas of not wanting to be excluded in the process, while also “mak[ing] new friends” in the process. Who would not want to belong? Without too many identifiers to why these blogs are the top, the weblog name alone – *TopMommyBlogs.com* – gives this site all the credibility it needs for mothers looking for a place to try on new blogs and see if they fit their needs. Because recommendations are generated by users to the site, readers become more powerful than the unknown entity behind the weblog. Users gain a new form of empowerment as authority is generated from the crowd.

The difference between *TopMommyBlogs.com* (TMB) and *Babble.com* is their visual layout. *Babble.com* feels more highbrow using images of real people, where TMB is cartoonish. TMB draws women with money to spend right in with reminders to shop and categories for couponing. Fortunately for my study, many of the same mommy blogs show up as “best” or “top” in any category on TMB. *Babble.com* produces a list of the best blogs for each year so it was easy to find the best from 2012. TMB’s list of the top blogs is constantly changing. This change is based on a rating system that stems from the mommy bloggers activity and reader’s recommendations.

Artifact Introduction and Analysis

The first blog I chose to analyze is listed as the seventh best mommy blog on *Babble.com* and is written by Liz Gumbinner. *Babble.com*’s writers describe Gumbinner’s blog as follows:

We knew we were going to love Liz as soon as we found her making fun of her own pregnancy journal. From there, our relationship has done nothing but grow. This delightfully snarky blog is low on the cutesy, being-a-mommy-is-all-sunshine-and-giggles posts and practically bursting with thoughtful content that ranges from musings on stay-at-home dads to a direct explanation of why working moms aren't "doing it all." Gumbinner has even published a HuffPo piece on why your child isn't special. And her blog has also taken an international turn, thanks to her work with One Moms. After traveling to Ethiopia with the group earlier this year to support moms living in extreme poverty, Gumbinner has extensively blogged about her experiences and her subsequent work with the group. (*Babble.com*)

This description informs readers that *Mom-101.com* is "snarky" and "low on the cutesy" meaning it is in direct contrast to the behavior ("being-a-mommy-is-all-sunshine-and-giggles") one would expect from mothers. Any mom who can relate with being on the outside of motherhood expectations can relate to this blog. The added bonus of this mom working "to support moms living in extreme poverty" gives this blog an appeal to pathos most would not expect. Gumbinner is a snarky mom with something to contribute. Acting as a review of blog content, *Babble.com* reinforces the choices on their best list by offering insight to other women on why they should love this blog as much as they do. A glowing review from Babble certainly creates an ethos to *Mom-101.com* that otherwise might not be present.

Liz Gumbinner is an advertising copywriter and contributor to many online websites. She has been featured in *Redbook Magazine* and on iVillage.com. She is a single mother to two daughters. She writes of herself: "So about this mom thing; I am one of those beyatches [sic] who managed to get pregnant on the very first try at 36, when my ovaries had no business being so cooperative. I am grateful, if still a bit shocked, even all these years later" ("About Me"). Her writing style is obviously humorous and effectual in that she posits herself, not as a parenting expert, but just like

every other mom with her tagline: “I don’t know what I’m doing either” (*Mom-101.com*). She jokes of her mommy fame stating, “[I]t’s always



Figure 4 – Banner from *Mom-101.com*, April 10, 2013

easy to be an expert on other people’s children” (“About Me”). Her website is colorful and contains cartoonish sketches and stock photos instead of real life photos of herself and her children (Figure 4). She has plenty of space on her blog in which to promote her other writing endeavors on sites such as *CoolTechMom.com* and *CoolMomPicks.com*. She establishes her credibility by listing her blogging awards and connection to other media outlets. This mom is in the business of making a profit.

The second blog I chose to analyze is *HotMessMom.com*. It is listed as number two on the *TopMommyBlogs.com* weblog. This blog has a “566 average number of referrals in” and “3,107 referrals out” (*TopMommyBlogs.com*). It is listed under the category of “Humor Blogs” and is rated 4½ cupcakes out of 5 by readers. Assumedly, we are to understand that the more cupcakes the better. Their one-line description quotes

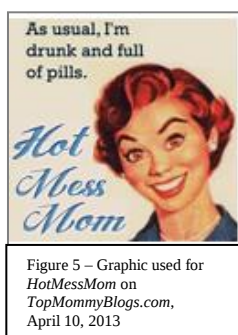


Figure 5 – Graphic used for *HotMessMom* on *TopMommyBlogs.com*, April 10, 2013

the writer by stating: “Antics, Stories, Travel, Family and all sorts of ridiculousness that makes my life a hot mess”

(*TopMommyBlogs.com*). The graphic used to promote this blog is a face of a housewife from Betty Friedan’s era with the words, “As usual I’m drunk and full of pills” at the top (Figure 5). Meant as a

humorous stab at the stereotypical, stifled housewife of the 1960s, the visual also infers that the content of this blog will be funny. However, we do not know the real identity of *HotMessMom.com*.

Unlike *Babble.com*, *TopMommyBlogs.com* does not provide the real names or pictures of the women behind the blogs. This attempt at anonymity gives the writer a sense of safety, as online predators have been known to prey on women and children. Many mommy bloggers would rather be referred to as their online persona for this reason. Anonymity is also seen as empowering to individuals in its ability to form new identities. Authors Samuel Wilson and Leighton Peterson address the anonymous nature of the Internet in their 2002 article, “The Anthropology of Online Communities.” Here they suggest the connection between virtual spaces and “new constructions of identity” (457). Women who would rather not be perceived as a bad mother on the street may wish to hide their identity online, knowing that revealing the truth has its consequences. Similarly, these researchers have noted that many times online identities are associated with credibility (Wilson and Leighton 457). Hiding a “real” identity might be needed in order to maintain this credibility for an audience. In the case of *HotMessMom.com*, it is unclear why the writer is hiding behind a cartoon drawing; either because her real life is a mess and her credibility online will be shot or because her online identity might interfere with her real life.



Figure 6 – Banner for *HotMessMom.com*, April 10, 2013

The banner for *HotMessMom.com* does draw attention to the fact that the writer is a mother of sons by stating, “Boogers are belicious [sic], and other joys of raising boys” (Figure 6). The writer uses a known stereotype – boys like boogers – in order to bring a laugh to other mothers and to draw in a specific audience: mothers of sons. In an attempt

to sound hip and cool, while increasing readership, the writer encourages others to “Subscribe To My Shizzle” on the top banner (*HotMessMom.com*). Again, this blog uses cartoons instead of photos to obscure the reader from what the writer looks like. The only photograph of this blogger is taken from the back of her and her boys by a fountain. No faces are seen. As I explained, privacy can be a big issue with Internet writing, especially when it comes to children. Most mothers know and understand this; therefore, the writer of *HotMessMom.com* has a good chance of maintaining her readership despite a lack of any real connection to her name or face.

HotMessMom continues the theme of anonymity in how she introduces her readers to her family: “I don’t know why my life is a hot mess, it just is. For the purpose of this blog, my husband is referred to as ‘SEVEN.’ My boys are referred to as ‘*Number One*’ (age 12), ‘*Number Two*’ (age 9), and ‘*Number Three*’ (age 8). Funnily enough we call them that in real life as well. When you have 3 boys in 3 years it is hard to remember names. (And no...that is not the same way *Husband* became *Seven*)” (“About”). By numbering her children readers can stay abreast of the boys’ activity without knowing any names. By including their ages, however, readers can better understand the boys’ antics, especially if readers have similar aged children living in their homes.

HotMessMom is using her standpoint of being a mother of sons to write a specific narrative argument about the culture of boys. However, listed in the “Favorites” section of her blog, titles such as “Tylenol LSD Flashbacks,” “When is it okay to turn down free wine?” and “Happy Hour was SHOCKING” make it seem like these are alcohol infused themes instead of narratives about raising boys.

The third blog I came across in my research is *Momastery.com*. This mommy

blog is rated number eight on *Babble.com*'s best for 2012 and is written by Glennon Doyle Melton. Melton's blog is subtitled, "Truth Tellers + Hope Spreaders" and also contains this descriptor: "Momastery is where we practice living bigger, bolder & truer on this earth. Where we remember what we already know: we can do hard things, love wins + we belong to each other" (*Momastery.com*). Mothers are taken in by the creative outlay of the blog and the hopeful message (Figure 7). Melton is a self-described recovering bulimic and alcoholic who on Mother's Day in 2002 found herself pregnant, not married, and an addict. She describes, "I alternated between staring at the test in my shaking hand and staring at my bloodshot eyes in the bathroom mirror. I tried to force



these truths to mesh: I am a drunk. I am alone. I am pregnant" ("Meet Glennon"). Melton

continues her story to explain how she got herself out of that state to be the married mother of three she is today. While much of this post takes in ideas related to personal recovery and identity formation, the bravery it took to write about such issues in an open forum on a mommy blog cannot be overstated. She calls this bravery her "nakedness" and explains, "My nakedness allows me to tell the truth without shame or fear and my brokenness is what allows others to trust and love me" ("Meet Glennon"). Melton's acknowledgment about her brokenness, and the shocking subject of addiction within a mommy blog, shatters good mother ideologies and is radical, but it also allows her readers to trust her honesty. Why would she lie about parenting advice when she told such dark and personal truths? This mom is funny, but she is also honest.

In “BlogHer and Blogalicious: Gender, Race, and the Political Economy of Women’s Blogging Conferences” (2012), author Jessie Daniels acknowledges the trusting nature of mommy blogs. She reported on the statistics presented at the 2008 BlogHer conference, which proved that women bloggers were trusted more than institutions as an information source (35). Women recognize the falsity in advertisements and have learned not to believe in messages from large corporations. Mommy bloggers on the other hand, are a trusted information source because their recommendations come from their own use of a product. For this reason, women are turning to mommy blogs for their opinions, especially when mommy bloggers are willing to admit all and share all in an attempt to be brave.

Even *Babble.com*’s descriptor showcases Melton’s bravery:

Glennon’s “About Me” page starts off with a bang: “I’m a recovering bulimic and alcoholic.” Dedicated to showcasing life, warts and all, Glennon deserves mucho kudos for allowing complete internet strangers so much access to her life. Eating disorders, substance abuse, vulnerability, faith, charity, life’s purpose — almost nothing is off the table for this mom of three, and her audience is drastically richer because of it. Melton insists that the blog is part of her healing process, but the truth is, it’s healing for many of her readers as well.

Babble.com is inviting other mothers, who may struggle in similar ways, to follow this blog, as well as mothers who do not because “the truth is” readers who are “complete internet strangers” can access her life and possibly heal from other imperfections they have just by reading Melton’s story. *Babble.com* uses Melton’s personal credibility to give strength to their choice of her on their best list.

Melton identifies that her blog’s name came from her idea that motherhood is like being in a monastery because “it’s a sacred place, apart from the world, where a seeker can figure out what matters and catch glimpses of God. It’s also like being pecked to

death by merciless chickens. Often, while I am being mercilessly pecked, I dream of running away and joining a silent order of monks. Hence – Momastery” (“Welcome”). She expresses humor about the frustrations that many mothers feel, and her desire to run away to a quiet place, when she affirms, “Momastery is an open window. It’s a place to take a deep breath. It’s a place to drop out and tune in. It’s a place to stop striving, stop competing, stop suspecting, stop hiding. It’s a place to tell and hear the truth. To grow and rest. To be big and brave or small and silent” (“Welcome”). Most mothers understand this need for silence and rest, and are willing to follow along in her blog in an attempt to gain even a few moments of what Melton is offering.

The fourth and last blog I chose to analyze is currently the number one rated blog on *TopMommyBlogs.com*. It is also listed under the category of “Humor blog” and has a rating of 4½ cupcakes out of 5. *Not-Your-Average-Mom.com* is written by Susie J., a “42-year-old, former teacher who is

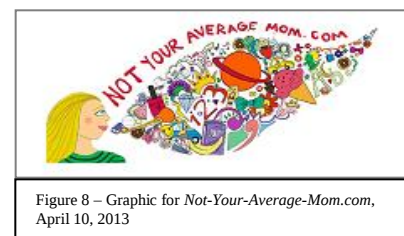


Figure 8 – Graphic for *Not-Your-Average-Mom.com*, April 10, 2013

now a stay-at-home-mom,” who explains, “My days are non-stop, and I try to maintain my sanity by looking for the humor in, well, everything” (“About”). Susie J. is married and has seven children ranging in ages from infancy to teenager (exact ages not given). *Not-Your-Average-Mom.com* was started just a year ago right when I started this project. I decided to follow along to see the trajectory of Susie’s writing compared to my own. Her banner portrays her need to spout off what is in her head by showing an illustration of a woman with a very large thought bubble (Figure 8). Her blog did not start off at the top; it has taken diligent effort, writing almost daily, and marketing herself to other bloggers, for Susie to reach the top spot. Mommy bloggers tend to be loyal and

supportive of each other. Susie has probably spent a great deal of time reading other mommy bloggers, voting for them, and in turn asking for their vote. Her posts have gotten more insightful and funnier over the last year. She has been taken in by a community of her peers and learned the mommy blogging trade.

Susie's children are also numbered as she writes about them. This could be done for reasons of privacy or because by not identifying too specifically, the blogger becomes more relatable, an Everywoman. Even *TopMommyBlogs.com* showcases her blog as "Mom of seven attempting to maintain order and sanity." If anyone has something to say about parenting, it would be Susie J. But her blog is not about parenting advice or collecting recipes; *Not-Your-Average-Mom.com* is about the everyday struggles that mothers face. Her blog posts are about finding a sippy cup in the toilet, or noticing a taco in her purse, or seeing that her sunglasses were used to shave away a citronella candle ("Take Someone Else"). This is the messy side of motherhood that all moms know about but no one really talks about. The generic families shown on television or in magazines do not describe Susie's life and she uses her blog to say it is okay. This type of attitude helps other mothers feel they are not alone in the daily drudgery of childcare. Susie's blog posts invite this community perspective as she models the idea that mommy blogging may start off as personal expression and morph into what Aimee Morrison suggests is interpersonal, or a change from a focus on self to an emphasis on community (43). Community becomes a very important aspect of mommy blogs. It is where the audience becomes a participant in the narrative of the writer.

Analysis of the Narratives

A narrative analysis focuses on the interpretation of the stories that people tell to make sense of their worlds. Narratives are typically “social products that are produced by people in the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations” (Lawler). A rhetorical analysis of a narrative specifically looks at language use within the story and evaluates how it contains aspects of persuasion. Typically all narratives are written for a specific purpose or about a certain topic. Therefore, after choosing my research subjects, I categorically looked for topical posts on four subjects about mothering which get the most media attention and are often misrepresented: the mommy wars, perfect parenting, loss of identity, and childbirth.

The Mommy Wars

The mommy wars, a term coined by the media in the late 80s, consist of women on two sides of the fence: the stay-at-home mother and the mom who works. This battle gained prominent media attention in 2002 when an episode of the Oprah show gained its highest viewership ever by staging a debate between women on both sides of this issue. Watching mothers verbally duke it out on national television led the public to believe that this war was one where all women had a side. Newspapers, magazines, books, and other popular television shows, all added fuel to the fire by polarizing the two sides and insisting that there was no middle ground in this war (Johnston and Swanson, “Moms Hating Moms” 497). Mothers on both sides of the issue claimed the other was falling into the bad mother category. Books such as *When Mothers Work: Loving our Children without Sacrificing Ourselves* (1997) and *Parenthood by Proxy: Don’t Have Them if You Won’t Raise Them* (2000) angered women even further. If left to mainstream media, the

mommy wars would never end. In 2004 researchers Deirdre Johnston and Debra Swanson conducted study “to explore the effect on mothers of these polarized characterizations of motherhood and to assess the social support mothers perceived they receive for their mother identity” (497). They interviewed 98 women and found the rhetoric surrounding the mommy wars was mostly internalized by stay-at-home moms, citing a lack of cultural support for their role. It is possible to assume that mommy blogs have the potential to help with cultural support in their ability to create communities.

The mommy wars are a popular topic on mommy blogs. Liz Gumbinner of *Mom-101.com* has been hailed foray into the mommy wars. Her blog post on February 2, 2010 entitled, “Grass: Greener. The Truth About the Mommy Wars” is new look into a subject the media would have women believe is a fight to the death. Gumbinner presents a neutral view of the mommy wars. She claims that women on either side want what the other has. She does this by admitting to what she thinks when she sees a mom with children at lunch, then reverses the viewpoint and suggests what the woman with her children thinks of the career woman sitting alone. She states, “[W]hat I would give not to be racing back to the office right now. What I would give to be here instead with my girls, sharing a croissant . . . And surely, one of the moms looks at me and thinks: What I would give for a whole 10 minutes to walk through these halls by myself” (“Grass: Greener”). Gumbinner presents an argument that both moms are jealous of the other, both want what the other has at that very moment, and there’s no war in that. Why then does this war even exist? Women are somehow viewed as being on opposite sides of the fence on this issue because the media would have us believe so. There is an obvious power indication here. If women are kept at odds over this issue they will never join

forces in order to hold power in society, power that would have to be taken from men in the end.

Gumbinner also tackles a branch topic in the mommy wars: how women can have it all. In a post titled “The Unspoken Truth of Mothers on Top” dated April 4, 2011, Gumbinner admits that no woman on the top “has it all” and that the idea is a complete fabrication. She says, “Every day I struggle to find the balance, not just between work and home, but between work and fulfillment. Between security and passion. Between the bills I have to pay, and the whole living my dream thing that we daughters of feminists were promised in the 70’s” (“The Unspoken Truth”). She goes on to explain that with every choice she makes there is something she must give up, because no matter how many diaper changing dads are out there, women are still doing the majority of the household chores (“The Unspoken Truth”). Gumbinner received so many comments on her blog about this post that she wrote a follow up stating, “[I]t seems that whether we work out of the home or not, one thing so many of us seem to have in common is this struggle with balance; the feeling that maybe we do too much” (“The Unspoken Truth”). This inside peek into a woman’s mind is a universal language to mothers, yet it is not something men even consider, and it is breaking with muted group tradition. Women have a language of their own that has nothing to do with the dominant male group in society and they are using their blogs to unveil that language and invite other women along. Gumbinner ends this post with a question to her blog followers, “Do people think you do it all? What are the things you “do it all-ers” don’t do?” (“The Unspoken Truth”) This plea for a reader response aids in community creation for mothers. It allows women

to comment and be part of the conversation on issues that matter to their lives. It is a participatory response to citizen journalism.

Glennon Melton of *Momastery.com* also disputes the mommy wars with her post on February 4, 2013 entitled “Friendly Fire.” She explains she was listening to a radio show where two women from opposite sides were debating the mommy war issue. In frustration she thought, “[T]his is really getting old” (“Friendly Fire”). Through this comment, Melton questions why we are still having the same debate over and over again, and wonders why women cannot seem to agree that both sides have drawbacks. She describes how she has lived on both sides of the issue and in both cases she was infused with “Mommy Guilt.” She explains, “When I worked outside my house, Mommy Guilt rode shotgun with me each morning, chiding me for dropping off my sick boy at day care instead of keeping him home and for rocking him the night before instead of preparing for work” (“Friendly Fire”). In contrast, when she became a stay-at-home mom Mommy Guilt reared its ugly head again and started to berate her for not doing enough, or for spending money she did not have because she was not working, or for wasting her education. She thought staying home would help but she realized, “Mommy Guilt stays home with me” (“Friendly Fire”). Melton calls out women who scream at each other over these issues as unhappy and insecure about their choices. She states, “When you yell about how much peace you have with your decisions, it just doesn’t ring true. The thing is, if you’re yelling, I don’t believe that you’ve got it all figured out. I don’t even believe that YOU believe you’ve got it all figured out. I think your problem might be that you’re as internally conflicted as the rest of us about your choices” (“Friendly Fire”).

This internal conflict is at the heart of the mommy wars. In the 2006 book, *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families*, Leslie Morgan Steiner describes the conflict as “Our Inner Cat Fight” (x), acknowledging the war is within ourselves. Her book contains the stories of many women as they reflect on the mommy wars, and all her contributors agree: this war needs to end. It damages all women when we fail to recognize that mothering is different for all women. Blogs such as *Mom-101.com* and *Momastery.com* work to help combat damaging media influences that are just out to incite women with the goal of keeping the war going so they can gain a larger audience.

Perfect Parenting

Part of the good mother/bad mother dichotomy, and at the center of the mommy wars, is the debate on perfect parenting. Polarizing topics within this argument range from how women should discipline kids, to what they should feed them, to how their children should be educated. There are so many decisions to be made in parenting and many mothers feel overwhelmed with fear of making the wrong choice. This fear leads women to turn to mainstream media to hear from experts in the parenting field. It is this very act that often leads to women’s anxieties over the issue. The reality of parenting verses expert advice, often contradict leaving mom stuck in the middle.

HotMessMom.com contains some insightful posts about the reality of parenting children. In her post titled “Superwoman I am not” from November 12, 2011, the author writes about a gene she claims to be missing. The gene that “makes you choose to push yourself to do more. To keep going. To run an extra mile. To stay up late cleaning your house and packing lunches even though you are exhausted” (“Superwoman”). She does

not have that particular trait, and assumes it is important to others. HotMessMom continues her post by claiming to have the “It’s good enough” gene. She acknowledges she wishes she were different, but says, “It’s just not who I am” (“Superwoman”). This post is an attempt to dispel the myth of the good mother. Good mothers are viewed by society as having a natural genetic trait that accounts for being agreeable to constantly cleaning and organizing the house, while also serving children. HotMessMom has a contrary narrative to the myth, one that contains her truth, which is that she does not have the natural gene she is supposed to have. This superwoman, or “supermom,” ideal stemmed from advertising in the 1980s. During this time a new direction for women was exploited in the media. The “stereotypical/ideological family woman” was someone who would do everything for her family without complaint and do it well (Robinson and Hunter 468). This damaging narrative exploited women as it reinforced traditional roles, once again bringing the good mother into the foray.

In contrast, Lori Lopez argues, “All women who have children are striving toward their vision of the idealized ‘good mother’” (731). By attempting to dispel myths of good mothering, in writing about the daily drudgery of the job, women show that they are still trying to achieve that perfect mother status. The blogs give women a forum to display their imperfections, but by showcasing them as imperfections, it upholds the myth of what mothering should be. For HotMessMom to discuss her lack of the perfection gene, it is saying everyone should have the gene, instead of embracing her own terminology of the “It’s good enough gene.” Her post is even more contradictory in that it goes on to say, “I think it would be nice to wake up every morning to a pristine home with a place for everything and everything in its place, I’m not going to be the one to make it happen.

I know that about myself. I accept it” (“Superwoman”). Yet, she then discusses how she is going to “pretend” for a day that she does have this gene and will make everyone work to clean up the house. So is the gene good enough or not? Somewhere inside of herself, she does want to live the myth.

In contrast, Glennon Melton of *Momastery.com* debunks the perfection myth right from the start by proclaiming, “perfection is a mirage ...it’ll always disappear just before you arrive” in her welcome message (“Welcome”). She adds to these thoughts in a post entitled, “Mastering the Mom” on November 13, 2012. She admits, “I never give parenting advice, for obvious reasons. This comes as a disappointment to folks who find this blog hoping it’s called ‘Mom-mastery.’ . . . We don’t master motherhood here. I really don’t think that’s possible” (“Mastering the Mom”). This quote is in direct contrast to all the information women receive elsewhere about parenting from supposed “experts.” For example, in the 1950s and 60s mothers had Doctor Spock, who many believed could do no harm. Doctor Spock sold more books than any other parenting expert in history (Douglas and Michaels 61). His name is legend. Yet Douglas and Michaels would argue that because Dr. Spock was the first to discuss bonding of mother and baby, his ideas kept women squarely at home with children. Any mother who really loved their child would follow his advice and strive for perfect parenting. Dr. Spock warned women that their lack of bonding would be detrimental to the child and would lead to anti-social and sometimes psychotic behavior (Douglas and Michaels 62-64). Shari Thurer states “this child-rearing philosophy inadvertently heightened mother’s sense of inadequacy” and the effect created “a degree of anxiety and guilt in mothers that is unparalleled in history” (260-61). The guilt this created in generations of women

fueled motherhood ideologies and made women believe they had to achieve a perfect mother status.

Melton disputes the ideology of perfect parenting in her blog by stating, “I would like to publicly state my secret opinion that it is a BAD PARENT thing to do to try to be a PERFECT PARENT. . . I think it is a GOOD PARENT strategy to let your imperfect flag fly and make lots of mistakes and relax a little too much, so that our kids have a lot of room for improvement” (“Mastering the Mom”). Not only is Melton using her standpoint as a woman who has aired her imperfections publically, she is also radically acting against the pervasive idea that there is any perfect goal to achieve. Melton shares her belief that “there is no way to be a perfect mother and a million ways to be a good one” (“Mastering the Mom”). Her writing suggests that good mothering is about having many tactics to try out for yourself, that mothering is individual not standardized, and that there are many ways to mother. This kind of thinking supports Winnicott’s theories that mother’s need to strive to be “good enough” instead of being perfect.

It makes sense that women would want to turn to experts for advice in parenting, because each generation of mothers faces new obstacles and challenges that the previous generation never had. Mommy blogs create communities where women can share in their own knowledge of what works and what does not work in parenting without having to seek out an “expert” opinion. In fact, mothers are finding new role models, preferring to seek advice from other women instead of the “dry, inflexible pronouncements spouted by experts in books and parenting magazines” (Mendelsohn). Most mothers would rather get advice from someone they trust than from an unknown entity. And as I stated earlier, more and more women are trusting in each other and in mommy blogs in general.

Because of the trust Melton establishes by sharing her very personal story, more women are willing to embrace her opinions on even the most controversial issues, such as admitting motherhood is not always fun. In a post written on January 4, 2012, Melton tackles what she refers to as the “CARPE DIEM moment” when strangers stop her and demand that she enjoy every moment with small children because it goes by so fast (“Don’t Carpe Diem”). While it may be true that the time does go by quickly, Melton is tired of other people reminding her and says, “[it] makes me worry that if I’m not in a constant state of intense gratitude and ecstasy, I’m doing something wrong” (“Don’t Carpe Diem”). She relates stories of being stopped in the store by old ladies who are watching her children tear apart the place while at the same time telling her how wonderful a time it is and that she should cherish these moments. Melton’s answer to this quandary is the recognition that what these woman really love is “having parented” and that they may not have felt so in a similar moment that they currently find her in (“Don’t Carpe Diem”). She would prefer women to be real and honest and tell her they know it is hard and that someday she too will love “having parented” (“Don’t Carpe Diem”). Melton questions, “Why is it that the second a mother admits that it’s hard, people feel the need to suggest that maybe she’s not doing it right? . . . Maybe the fact that it’s so hard means she IS doing it right...in her own way...and she happens to be honest” (“Don’t Carpe Diem”). Her suggestion that honesty is helpful in mothering rhetoric is fascinating. Mommy blogs offer honesty in their writings; that is what Alice Bradley was originally suggesting was radical. Aimee Morrison considers the “more that bloggers expose about their personal lives, the more tightly bonded they feel to the communities in which they participate, and the happier they feel, generally” (40).

Therefore, it is not all about welcoming others to her blog, Melton's honesty aids in her own recovery and acceptance of herself. By sharing their inner most thoughts, mommy bloggers can use an open forum as a form of catharsis and healing.

The greater myth Melton attempts to dispel is the idea surrounding the difficulty of the job of mothering. Many scholars believe locating motherhood within the category of a job is where all the problems begin. Judith Stadtman Tucker writes of this in her 2006 article, "The New Future of Motherhood." Tucker suggests that women should not be bound by the descriptor that motherhood is a job, or a profession, because when we put motherhood on a pedestal and valorize it as the most important job in the world, "we inevitably reinforce the same ideological system that devalues the work of care giving and limits women's individual and political power" (35). This power is needed for women to be able to make changes in the societal structure that claims women's work is of secondary nature to the work of men. Tucker suggests that mothering be viewed not as a job, but as a relationship. This relationship can then be valued in a more authentic participatory way, where women willingly embrace it as an "individual process, not a monolithic one" and can discuss its depth and breadth "without feeling as though there is only one right answer to the question of what it means to be a mother" (Tucker 35-36).

Defining motherhood as a job brings ideas of performance and categories of "good" or "bad" into the conversation. Also, evaluations over whether or not mothers enjoy their profession are brought up, and if mothers admit to not enjoying the job, they are then typically laden with feelings of guilt. Melton unknowingly shares Tucker's opinions and expounds in her post:

My point is this. I used to worry that *not only* was I failing to do a good enough job at parenting, but that I wasn't *enjoying* it enough. Double

failure. I felt guilty because I *wasn't* in parental ecstasy every hour of every day and I *wasn't* MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY MOMENT like the mamas in the parenting magazines seemed to be doing. I felt guilty because honestly, I was tired and cranky and ready for the day to be over quite often. And because I knew that one day, I'd wake up and the kids would be gone, and *I'd* be the old lady in the grocery store with my hand over my heart. Would I be able to say I enjoyed every moment? No. ("Don't Carpe Diem")

Melton is clearly using her honesty to embrace her own personal feelings on how difficult being a mother is, not only in the day-to-day work (or relationship) but also in knowing that the future will certainly bring feelings of nostalgia back to a time she will forget was hard and guilt ridden. Melton wants other mothers to understand that if they don't acknowledge how hard mothering is, it only gets harder ("Mastering the Mom").

Loss of Identity

Another consequence of perfect parenting is the loss of identity many women feel after having a child. Shari Thurer describes the insistence from experts in the 20th century that mother's had a job to do, one which entailed a constant attention placed on children. She explains the "inner state" of a woman was prescribed to her, and "motherhood was a necessary developmental stage for all women and should supplant other identities," because "the good mother has no needs of her own" (256). As we got further from the Friedan era, mothers acknowledge their need to hold on to identity. Many women report wanting to go back to work after having a child because otherwise "they'll go stir crazy, they'll get bored, the demands of the kids will drive them nuts, they won't have an opportunity to use their brains or interact with other adults, they'll feel like they're going nowhere, and they'll lose their sense of identity in the larger world" (Hays 135). These women felt a "strong pull toward the outside world" because they knew they would lose parts of themselves if they stayed home (Hays 136). Yet many women still

choose to stay home, because of pressure to ideological standards or because they simply desire to. Their identity loss is a valid concern.

The job of mothering still has standards attached to it today, but now women are more willing to speak up and help each other maintain personal identities instead of accepting the either/or proposition described by Adrienne Rich: “motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom” (160). Mommy blogs dispel these either/or choices by proving a woman’s identity does not have to die just because she gave birth to a child. Writers of these blogs create “an autonomous self” by openly discussing their feelings of identity loss, while also helping their readers understand how the loss of self can come about in parenting (Rich 160).

A post from HotMessMom written on July 9, 2012 and entitled, “Resurfacing,” discusses the loss of identity many women feel after having children. Instead of the commentary that mothers feel complete after having a child, this mom explains how she “lost” herself and felt alone. She says, “I had 3 boys in 3 1/2 years. I remember crying a lot. And yelling. And fighting with Seven. And not speaking to Seven. And being lonely. And exhausted. And feeling like a failure because I tried to do it all and do it well” (“Resurfacing”). HotMessMom’s honest portrayal of the difficulty of becoming a parent, while still maintaining personal identity, dispels the myth that mothers find their only happiness from their children. It also shows that women must take charge of their own story in order to have changes happen in their lives. The narrative post continues: “As I began to make more mommy friends, my resurfacing began. I started to have an identity. I started to recognize myself again. This was not an overnight occurrence... it took a few years.. But little by little I resurfaced. ME. Not ‘mommy,’ not ‘honey,’ ME”

(“Resurfacing”). Identity formation for women has a rich history outside of motherhood roles. HotMessMom is attempting to find her own identity while also letting other women know they are not alone in their loss of self.

Liz Gumbinner of *Mom-101.com* also writes about “giving up pieces” of herself in one of her blog posts from March 20, 2009, entitled “On motherhood and identity and generalizations and the crazy jeckyl [sic] and hyde-ness of it all.” With this title it becomes clear that even Gumbinner is not sure of the stability of her identity. She relates identity loss to accepting the term “mommy blogger” and explains how advertisers strip mothers of their uniqueness by assuming they are all “one dimensional” (“On motherhood”). Gumbinner expresses her desire to be seen as more than just a mommy because she has facets to her that are unique and cannot be lumped in with other women. She explains generalization of all mothers is like “having your soul misunderstood” (“On motherhood”). The label of mommy blogger tends to create polarizing opinions for women bloggers. Many women find the title condescending and an intrusion into a personal relationship, since it is only children who call women mommy. Women also feel they cannot be taken seriously with the title. Whereas, other women argue the term is out there so why not embrace it and make of it what we want to – to empower the word much like feminists have empowered the word “bitch” and “girl” for their own use (D’Arcy). Gumbinner considers both points when she states,

I’m . . . fascinated by this pervasive fear that so many of us have of being “just” moms. Or more specifically, being labeled “just moms.” Because none of us *are* any single thing in life. None of us. It’s hard accepting a general label of any kind when we don’t feel general inside. I also don’t want our expressed fear of being thought of as “just a mom” to indicate that we’re not proud of our mom-ness, our motherhood, our mothering, or the community of fellow mothers that we adore. These are, in fact, the things I think we’re proud of most. (“On motherhood”)

Mommy bloggers are proud of their children, but there is a general fear that if they complain too much they might be seen as not loving their children or not happy being a mom. These women clearly love their children (as many of their other posts would indicate), yet they would like to be viewed as something other than a “mommy.” They fight hard to maintain their identity and their posts reflect this desire to be seen as more than a mom. It is brave and important for women to state they do not always identify with the motherhood role. The comments which resulted also expose how the ideology is difficult for many women to bear. One reader states: “Right on! Liz, it’s uncanny how you express my thoughts in such clearer language than I would ever be able to use. Ah! I feel understood and justified, and it is lovely!” (Alexis). Julie Pippit comments, “I wear my labels, they don’t wear me.” And AlyGatr posts, “Motherhood and identity...BINGO! None of us are ‘just a mommy’ any more than someone is ‘just a lawyer’ or ‘just a blonde.’ It makes us comfortable to be able to put labels on things and yes, they might describe some aspect of us, but it does not mean that any of them have to define us” (“On motherhood”). These comments are an interesting perspective on what many women are feeling about the label of not just mommy blogger, but also of mommy in general. Comments are one facet of participatory journalism in blogging spaces. In this case, comments affirm the general consensus that the inner self of a woman remains the same after giving birth.

Comments also provide the most evidence that mommy blogging is a new form of participatory citizen journalism. Mommy blogs create spaces for feedback on posts regarding motherhood problems. Readers respond, learn, and acknowledge their own frailties when considering how confusing motherhood rhetoric really is. The conclusion

of HotMessMom's "Surfacing" post is an attempt to help others through an honest portrayal of life as a mother. It includes her opinions on perfect parenting and identity loss, and elicits an overwhelming response from readers. HotMessMom announces:

I write this because I forget. I write this because it's important. I write this because nobody ever tells you that you will be lost. You learn how to pay bills and balance a checkbook and change a diaper. You are taught how to nurse, how to burp, and how to administer infant CPR. You are given advice on sleeping, eating, walking, and colic. You are not taught how to be happy. You are not taught how to be married. You expected perfection. You didn't get it. You try to be perfect. You are not. ("Resurfacing").

Many mothers reading these words can relate, and those who cannot (because they have not had children yet) will eventually understand what they were not told about parenting. This kind of voice, a voice that shatters the unknown about becoming a mother, also creates communities when other women post comments. For the "Resurfacing" post, readers made hundreds of comments saying things like, "I just cried" (Amy M.R.), "You have given me hope" (Jenn), and "you put my thoughts into words perfectly" (Cameron). Often women feel isolated and alone in their feelings about being a mother. These blogs act as a support system for women struggling with identity after having children. They may not know that what they are feeling is normal. As one woman commented, "Thank you for letting me know that I'm not crazy and that there will be a day where everything will be normal again" (Emi). The support for these readers is not easily described, but it is evident that these blogs are meaningful for many mothers. They in turn can help other women by reposting HotMessMom's blog or by sharing the link with others, which expands the community. One reader affirms this idea by stating, "I thought of so many people that could really get something out of reading this post in particular...so I'm going to be forwarding/sharing it with them" (Leah).

Sharing mommy blogs to friends expands the blog's reach while welcoming other mothers into the blogging community. It also creates a larger forum for mothers to raise consciousness about identity loss, especially at the onset of labor where "the depths of this conflict, between self-preservation and maternal feelings, can be experienced . . . as primal agony (Rich 161). Although, the pain of childbirth is not just about physical pain, it is also about the emotional pain of transitioning from one role to another.

Childbirth

Many mommy bloggers share the details of their experiences in childbirth. This is not surprising since childbirth stories for women are as important as war stories for men. Adrienne Rich (*Of Woman Born*), Jane Lazarre (*The Mother Knot*), Ann Dally (*Inventing Motherhood*), and many other authors all begin their mothering research by giving an account of their personal experience with pregnancy and childbirth. The experience itself is so mind shattering, and usually traumatic, that most women feel the need to explain the details of this battle for life. Birthing stories are unique to women. They are narrative accounts of strength and survival, and are usually different for each baby. They are a rite of passage—the first foray into the new world of motherhood and the final farewell to girlhood.

Susie J., from *Not-Your-Average-Mom.com* shared her childbirth story in a post from September 29, 2012. There is one childbirth experience that most mommy bloggers agree upon: it hurts. No matter what the experts say, no matter what your doctor says, and no matter what any other woman's experience was, there is just no getting around the pain. In a post from September 29, 2012 entitled, "Pah Push it REAL Good," Susie attempts to give her audience the truth in a very humorous way:

I'll go out on a limb and say that if you have more than 3 kids, your experiences with childbirth haven't been completely horrendous. But let's get one thing clear. When people say "You forget about the pain as soon as the baby is born," well, that's just bullshit. I mean, you realize the pain is temporary, but it really fucking hurts. Like worse than anything. Ever. Times a hundred. And that is why the most amazing person in the world is not my husband, or my mom, or my dad, or Steve Jobs, or the Dalai Lama. It's the dude who invented the epidural. I hope that guy made an assload of money. Because the only thing better than an epidural is... Oh... Wait... There *isn't* anything better than an epidural. Once you get that shit, you don't care what the hell happens. ("Pah Push it")

Humor aside, Susie J. expresses her views on an important aspect of reality verses the media's portrayal of an event. Childbirth is messy, painful, and necessary, yet most television examples of childbirth contain a scene of a woman's legs opened but covered, some loud screaming, and a few pushes, with a beautiful, clean baby as the result.

Adrienne Rich claims that we have been taught everything we should feel when it comes to childbirth, "from willing victimization, to ecstatic fulfillment" (156). This supposedly "discreet" event in a woman's life is mostly met with fear and trepidation for women, but it often seems the whole of society views the act as beautiful and joyful instead of the sacrifice and suffering it is. Again from Rich, "Patriarchy has told the woman in labor that her suffering was purposive—was *the* purpose of her existence; that the new life she was bringing forth (especially if male) was of value and her own value depended on bringing it forth" (159). This expectation of duty and purpose led much of the rhetoric surrounding childbirth to be one of ultimate fulfillment of a woman's role.

Glennon Melton of *Momastery.com* also describes the birth of her son honestly but with humor. She writes:

I went into labor one night at ten and started screaming for drugs upon the first contraction. Then I took a shower, applied my makeup and blew my hair dry. Then I straightened it and curled it. I wanted to be pretty when Chase saw me for the first time. I continued to scream for drugs while

priming and throughout the entire car ride to the hospital. When we walked through the doors of the hospital I lied down on the filthy floor and said I wasn't moving until they brought a wheelchair and an epidural. Craig looked at the receptionist and shrugged his shoulders. "She's been like this the whole time," he said. "*The whole* night?" The lady asked. "No, the whole *pregnancy*," Craig said. I don't believe in suffering silently. They wheeled me away and gave me the epidural. I was lovely after that, just a *lovely* patient really. ("Birth Story")

Melton's admittance to applying makeup and doing her hair, contrasting with screaming for an epidural, seem ridiculous yet real in some way. Most women reading her blog would laugh and agree having done something similarly insane while in the throes of labor. Craig's reaction also aids in the humor of the situation, but he diminishes her pain with a reference to her being difficult the entire pregnancy. That comment can be viewed as evidence of "gas lighting," or reducing a woman's emotions to purposeful drama with the intent to classify her as crazy ("A Message"). It is further explained as: "the sort of emotional manipulation that feeds an epidemic in our country, an epidemic that defines women as crazy, irrational, overly sensitive, unhinged. This epidemic helps fuel the idea that women need only the slightest provocation to unleash their (crazy) emotions. It's patently false and unfair" ("A Message"). Craig's comment was probably not meant to be hurtful, but at that moment he was making judgments on how his wife should feel. Melton counteracts his gas lighting by stating, "I've never been one to suffer in silence." She acknowledges the long history of women staying silent under their own oppression, and refuses to accept the traditional standard. She uses her voice in the narrative and again when she shares it with others on her blog.

Both Susie J. and Melton's accounts shatters not only the myth of childbirth, but also of the glory of the act. Susie J. describes it as "horrendous" and her only savior the anesthesiologist who delivers her from the pain; similarly Melton said she "screamed for

drugs.” These statements are in direct contrast to current pleadings surrounding the importance of natural childbirth. The science behind drug therapies in childbirth leads many to believe that those drugs can be harmful to the child. Putting a woman’s own needs aside, many “experts” argue the pain is necessary, that it is closely tied with love for the child, and that to endure such pain without relief bonds mother to baby even more (*BradleyBirth.com*). New childbirth methods open up options for women who would like to try the natural route, but the rhetoric used to convince them upholds unrealistic motherhood ideologies. For example, the Bradley Method of childbirth claims to be “the best start for your baby” and “most people want to give their babies every possible advantage” (“Why Take Classes”). Using words such as “best,” “most people,” and “advantage” call upon perfect mothering before a woman has even given birth. The problem with this kind of platform is that women choosing a different childbirth plan may feel guilty for not living up to the motherhood ideal. If mothers fail from the start, they feel defeated. Mommy blogs such as Susie J. and Melton’s provide the reality not only of the pain, but also of the choice to medicate, which helps other women feel confident about their childbirth choices and experience as well. This sense of community is a major component of mommy blogging. Communities of women act as a support system for each other, especially during childbirth. Again, the ability to comment creates a two-way conversation which increases support during a difficult time.

There is a strong sense of community and female bonding on Susie J.’s blog. The comments from her “Pah Push it REAL Good” post make it apparent other mothers are not afraid to share their own childbirth stories in response to what Susie wrote. Sandy Boyer, a follower of the blog, adds her experience with childbirth: “It hurt like hell.

Mostly burning as I tore pretty bad all the way past my rectum. The stitching part was actually longer and worse than the delivery. Sadist doc wouldn't give me a thing even though I was begging" ("Pah Push it"). Sandy's trust and willingness to share opens up blogs as a dialoging space. The format allows Susie to respond in kind: "Holy cow Sandy! You are funny. I feel like I just delivered your baby myself" ("Pah Push it").

This conversation demonstrates a "comment tribe," something mommy bloggers learn how to develop at "Bloggy Boot Camp," a daylong conference offered in major cities around the country (Mendlesohn). Comments create a two-way communication within blogging, often immediately. This is a foreign concept to traditional journalism, which typically has always been writers putting their opinions out into the market and waiting for letters in support or contrast to flow in. Often newspaper editors choose a select few to print in a "Letters to the Editor" column a week or two later. In turn those letters receive a response from the original writer. This process takes time and most people would have moved on from the topic. In a blog format, comments come in quickly and can be responded to from the original writer or other followers, which creates a real community conversation. Sites such as *Not-Your-Average-Mom.com* and others use the format to enhance their journalistic style and help in the formation of a grass-roots community movement around issues of importance to their audience.

Summary

With an eye towards rhetorical language, I have viewed numerous mommy blogs for the purpose of finding the radical nature of women writers in online spaces. I have demonstrated that mommy blogs are not just women sitting at home and keeping silent journals for future generations to read. Mommy blogs are sites open to discussion and

criticism. They are “women reviewing products, making political change, teaching other moms how to change a diaper and still more moms just sharing their everyday successes and failures” (Laussade). Their impact on society is relevant, and their help to new mothers cannot be overstated. Their future reach is undetermined but should not be underestimated as the Internet is only predicted to grow and thrive. Readers gain a community when following a mommy blog. Mothers from all over the country gain access to an instant support system, which provides knowledge and information on motherhood, a role not easily defined for most women. Mommy bloggers are defining motherhood for themselves and in the process they are “gaining new skills in technology, writing, photography, social media, and business, through blogging” (McKenna). Mommy blogging is a new form of citizen journalism as women are speaking out on issues that matter to them, filtered through a lens specific to their needs and processed from the standpoint of motherhood.

CHAPTER IV

CAPITALISM AND MOMMY BLOGS

Consequences of Capitalism

The first BlogHer conference was held in 2005 in an attempt to help form alliances between female bloggers and to create networks for social change. Because organizers quickly understood the monetary power these blogs have, the conference's main focus centers on how bloggers can market themselves in order to gain attention from advertisers. So, the movement has become more about creating opportunities for women to capitalize on than dispelling ideologies. But, rarely has the capitalistic system been good to women, because capitalism works under a certain set of dominant ideologies, those being individualism, competitiveness, and consumption, all considered masculine characteristics. Herbert Marcuse argues, "The governing values of a capitalist society are profitable productivity, assertiveness, efficiency, and competitiveness; or, the Performance Principle . . . Capitalism [then] is a form of male-dominated culture" (282). Women typically do not have assertiveness traits, nor are they as competitive as their male counterparts. A longer discussion would be needed to discover why, or if these traits are as important as a capitalistic society would have people believe.

Historically, mothers have not fared well under capitalism. The ideology has kept them bound to the home, doing the menial chores that aid patriarchy, because their unpaid labor in the private household supports men and allows for them to flourish in the public workspace. The performance principle Marcuse speaks of only works when someone else is handling the equally important labor of maintaining a household, i.e.,

cooking, cleaning and childcare. Heidi Hartmann reminds us how “housework is crucial to the reproduction of capital” in that it creates surplus value, or value that is not monetary but none-the-less essential (4). In addition, women also reproduce people, who ultimately contribute to the labor force. Capitalism then, supports the separation of our private and public lives, or home and work life (Hartmann 4). This division of labor has an extensive history and has inspired heated debate among Marxists and feminists alike. What is important to understand for my research on mommy blogs is that women’s value in the home is undermined by the lack of recognition that women at home do work and contribute to the overall system through this surplus value. What becomes the more interesting idea to research is the ability of these blogs to become vehicles for profit, participating in the capitalistic system while still being within the private sphere of the home. In a sense, women are taking their private experiences and making them public through the Internet, and then turning a profit.

The idea of work for profit at home is nothing new. Women have for years brought in “extra income” by profiting off of their daily chores, such as bringing in other’s laundry and sewing, offering childcare, or using their home for sales vehicles in what authors L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller define as the party plan economy. In their book, *Women at Work, Tupperware, Passion Parties, and Beyond*, Williams and Bemiller explain, “The party plan economy sits in a peculiar position between formal and informal work: it incorporates public and private space and includes individual and collective efforts” (10). This type of work is considered “wedge work” or the work between “formal labor and informal relationships” and is deeply gendered in the products that are typically sold within this domestic business (3). Like the party plan economy,

mommy blogs capitalize off of their work in the home by upholding and sustaining aspects of gender, but they also exert a certain amount of power in their use of the Internet as a non-gendered space (12). Williams and Bemiller describe this type of empowerment as the “bottom-up ability to exercise control over various aspects of one’s social, political, economic, and personal world; the emphasis on ‘power to’ rather than ‘power over’” (12). This is manifested as mommy blogs have the potential to create societal change by communicating feminist ideals to a large audience. Yet, because these blogs tend to center on ideas about lifestyle, and “lifestyle, by definition, centers on personal fulfillment rather than common dreams, one has to wonder about whether a feminist consciousness is even possible in such circumstances” (51). Unlike the party plan economy which keeps women’s work in the private realm, the structure of mommy blogs make women’s work public, but does continue to perpetuate a gendered culture.

In the past women have brought work into the private space of the home allowing them to earn while caring for children, whereas an Internet blog leaves the home and goes out into the public space, yet still allows for women to stay home while writing. Does this then defeat gendered ideas on workspaces? Again, from Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, we understand spaces to be representational. The Internet can be considered representational space, which is “directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (38-39). We inhabit the Internet when we enter in and use it. We control the space by interpreting certain signs and symbols. We link ourselves to various sites by exploring, leaving a digital trail behind us. But in this case, women are still linked to home through its use so the gendered nature of workspaces stays the same. This does not mean that societal changes

cannot occur. Much of Internet space today is used as a platform for politics and action. In fact, during this past election season 48% of voters turned to the Internet to watch news videos about the elections, and 40% of those videos were recommended by a friend (Smith). This statistic shows a few things. First, that politics are becoming more and more digital; second, communities are created when people talk to each other online; and third, social networks such as blogs create “a space for activism” (Smith). Both journalists and scholars alike have noted the connection between women who blog and feminist activism, especially considering the fact that women make up the majority of bloggers in this country (Daniels 30). While mommy bloggers may not see this connection themselves, the feminist community, specifically Ms. Magazine, makes the connection clear. They suggested “what they’re doing is a virtual version of feminist consciousness-raising: They’re being exceedingly open about their experiences of mothering, and sharing those experiences in an (online) community with other mothers” (Jesella). Then, after they find their comfort level with sharing their experiences, many mommy bloggers are more willing to face controversy as they find their “political selves” (Jesella). However, at issue here is questioning whether the mommy blog is more about income than activism.

Because the potential audience for mommy blogs is massive, capitalism enters in the form of advertising as companies negotiate deals with the top bloggers for publicizing their products. Jessie Daniels suggests that the way you draw money to your blog is by creating a close community then tying the people within that community to the products they typically buy (36). The community in the case of mommy blogs is women who possess “power as consumers within the domestic realm,” because women make the

majority of purchasing decisions in the home (Daniels 36). Daniels goes on to describe the problem with this kind of power:

The conceptualization of women's economic power situates it firmly within a domestic sphere tied to a heteronormative construction of gender in which men are breadwinners outside the home and women are located within the [. . . home] as managers of household and childrearing. This lens for understanding women's economic power obscures a number of other views. Chief among these is that women's economic power remains rather limited when measured in terms of wealth compared to men's, and that women are denied access to real economic power beyond the domestic realm. (36)

It is as if domestic power is used as a pacifier, to sooth the need for women to have some kind of control over monetary output. Some defend the relationship between mommy bloggers and corporate America claiming it gives women a say in the products they purchase, and shapes future economic growth (Mendelsohn). In this regard, women have some power, but it is over domestic items of little value to the masculine world.

Commodification

The capitalistic power of these blogs brings about another problem: the commodification of women's lives and, in turn, the lives of their children. Barbara Katz Rothman offers an overall argument when she states, "American motherhood now rests on three deeply rooted ideologies that shape what we see and what we experience . . . an ideology of patriarchy; an ideology of technology; and an ideology of capitalism" (139). Most understand how women have historically been commodified under the ideology of patriarchy, but an interesting point made by Rothman is the shift over time in the family dynamic from children being seen as workers to children as commodities, and the family as a unit of production to a unit of consumption (140). Mommy blogs uphold these new dynamics by capitalizing on stories of children, and through the blogs' advertising, they

invariably treat children as consumables. While women have the right to promote their own narratives, we must ask ourselves if they have the right to use their children as a commodity and sell their lived experiences as well. In old patriarchal systems children were “owned” by the father, but with more recent acknowledgments of women owning their own bodies, does that mean they own the children that come out of their bodies? This question is yet to be answered, but it does generate questions on the issue of advertising on mommy blogs and whether or not women have the right to use their children in a profitable way.

Capitalistic ideologies prove the lack of a relationship between the value of the worker and the value of the product they make. Workers in a capitalistic system do not own what they produce. This too begs the question: do parents own their children since they are “made” by them? Rothman argues, “People do not necessarily talk of or even actively think of their bodies or their children as property in the sense of real estate” (150). Yet mothers do consider the children they bear as theirs and speak of them as “my child.” Because of this, mothers feel a natural right, an obligation even, to record their histories. But when these histories are taken to the public, the privacy of the child is violated. Worse still, when the histories are sold, as in the case of advertising on mommy blogs, a profit is made off of the child. Now this may seem extreme and unintentional by most mommy bloggers, but that does not mean it is not true, or at least on some level a valid concern. After all, rarely do mommy blogs speak about teenagers. Is that because society views them as semi-adults with rights of their own, or is it because teenagers have access to the blogs their mothers write, as do their friends, and their embarrassment would just be too high a price to pay?

Truth

Truth is the last facet of mommy blogs I would like to address. When Alice Bradley stood at the BlogHer conference and stated that mommy blogging was a radical act, she claimed these blogs were a site to protest motherhood ideologies. She also claimed that mommy blogs showed the truth of the drudgery of parenting. Many women do show the lived reality of motherhood on their blogs, but I question if their reasons for doing so are radical or merely capitalistic. As it happens, the more outrageous the post, the more followers the blog is apt to gain. And the more followers a blog collects, the more advertisers will be drawn to the site. What became a space for truth regarding motherhood and its unrealistic expectations is now a site for, at the very least, extreme truths and outrageous story telling in an attempt to gain attention. When a monetary value is placed on the outlandish, or even the idealistic, what kind of truth can be told? Mommy bloggers understand that they are writing for an audience, an audience that needs to be entertained in order to keep coming back. Therefore, the truths in their narratives can also be categorized under performance rather than honesty. Even Henri Lefebvre discusses aspects of space as a drama fueled environment, when he explains that theater space “infuses the work and the moment” and establishes itself as dramatic action (188). The Internet as a space creates blogs infused with this drama in an attempt to inspire what good theater always does, entertain. And entertainment is rarely truth in its purest form.

Epilogue

By no means complete, this study does open up other avenues to explore when it comes to women blogging. Further research on mommy blogs specifically could be done

to search out lesser-known blogs to determine if the radical nature of blogging is indeed taking hold on all mommy blogs, or if women are merely using the technology to document children's lives or as an entrepreneurial endeavor. With the number of blogs increasing at an exponential rate each year, and conferences such as BlogHer focusing on the marketing aspects of blogging, there is no doubt many women are starting blogs as another income source. It would be interesting to consider other reasons women blog about their families if not for financial gain. As my earlier list of reasons why people blog indicated, an area of interest to me is catharsis or women blogging in order to relieve some type of frustration in their lives. A tie to the psychological benefits of blogging would be informative to many women, with the idea that blogging is a new form of self-therapy.

For my own future research, I plan to explore how women are using new media spaces to create community and to protest inequalities. I am specifically interested in websites such as: *FeministMormonHousewives.com*, *AllEnlisted.com*, *The-Exponent.com*, and *LDSwave.org*, which are radically changing how society views Mormon women and how Mormon feminists negotiate their faith. Sites like these create safe gathering spaces for religious women to discuss personal issues regarding faith, spirituality, and feminism without the fear of judgment and reproach. I call these conversations a discussion about "sacred justice" and have been involved personally in these spaces since starting this thesis. All the research I conducted on motherhood ideologies fits well with Mormon feminism since The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (i.e.: "Mormon Church" or "LDS Church") was established during the Victorian era and is still very tied to the ideals of women as mothers. In Mormon culture motherhood has always been a woman's

sacred duty, and mothers are revered for their divine roles. However, because motherhood is part of the expectation, the sacrifice is not fully understood or acknowledged within the religion. Mormon feminists attempt to tackle this discrepancy, along with many others, within the patriarchal system of the church instead of attacking from the outside.

I am also interested in new media spaces such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Pintrest*, and how they contribute to feminist protest efforts. As with any emerging technology, researchers and political activists alike must not only look to what is currently being used within the field, but also what is on the horizon that might take the place of the current format. In an effort to assist a movement, along with research and publishing, I am interested in searching out these new media spaces and using them for the benefit of a cause.

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